

NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Donald

Malcolm

**Guest
Editor**

Paisley, Scotland



In the six years or so since Donald Malcolm first started contributing to this magazine, his short stories have developed from fascinating little vignettes into intensely interesting short novelettes, mostly with a sound astronomical background in the main details. This latter subject is one which author Malcolm is well fitted to include in his stories as he took a course in astronomy some years ago, is Scottish secretary of the British Interplanetary Society, and belongs to the British Astronomical Association, the Astronomical Society of Scotland, and the Royal Astronomical Society.

Apart from his astronomical activities, he also has a wide range of hobbies, which include philately, archeology, art, and records, but despite these interesting pursuits he finds time to produce a steady output of fiction and science articles, the latter appearing regularly in seven journals. Much of his writing time is planned during off-work hours and rough drafts of stories are often worked up during his lunchbreaks.

His Guest Editorial in this issue carefully sums up many of his thoughts on the subject of science fiction, and, in part, answers some of the queries raised by earlier editorials.

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

March 1963

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Bottomless Pit

PHILIP E. HIGH



Guest Editor

DONALD MALCOLM



Eviction

JOHN BAXTER



- RUSS MARKHAM
- FRANCIS G. RAYER
- WALTER GILLINGS
- LAN WRIGHT



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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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Guest Editorial

As a fairly new writer who has made the grade the hard way, Donald Malcolm has some interesting comments to make as well as some worthwhile advice to would-be authors.

Fallacies In Science Fiction

by DONALD MALCOLM

When I was invited to contribute an editorial to this series, I saw immediately a golden opportunity to try and dispel what I think are some of the more glaring fallacies connected with science fiction.

That "social satire" is the role of science fiction seems to me to be perhaps the biggest fallacy of all. As a medium of social satire, science fiction isn't doing so well. For it to be effective, science fiction must be *seen* to fulfil its purpose, as outlined by Kingsley Amis.

Frederik Pohl is held by Amis to be the "focal writer" (my definition) of the social satire story; no quibbles there.

Now—do as I did, simply say to some of your friends, without preamble, "Frederik Pohl." They won't have heard of him. Inevitably, some wag will tag him as Gallup Poll's brother. Science fiction draws that type of weak joke.

The laugh's on us—if we accept Amis' premise that the prime objective of science fiction is to hold up the mirror to society.

Most of my friends haven't even heard of John Wyndham, who writes "threshold of possibility" stories which are, therefore, more the ordinary readers' meat than the general run of science fiction.

What chances, then, has Pohl, or, for that matter, Sturgeon, Clarke, Bradbury, Anderson, Asimov, *et al*, of making an impact on the mass of the readers? In a word: none.

If science fiction is to make *any* kind of impact, it must be read by many more people. To achieve that would involve many changes which, I maintain, would make science fiction no longer acceptable to writers, editors and regular readers.

Let me amplify that statement, using *New Worlds Science Fiction* as the Aunt Sally.

The magazine would have to go underground in the manner of *Galaxy*, and drop "science fiction" from the title. Following this into limbo would go the Editorial, the Literary Line-up, Postmortem, and Book Reviews. Articles would probably share the same fate.

Most magazine covers would send the average reader off telephoning for the men in the white coats. He isn't interested in editorial comment. He takes it as an obtrusion, or worse, a violation of his right to think for himself.

He's indifferent as to how stories rated. He'd read them, what more did they want? What other readers have to say about the stories, or about fiction in general, leaves him cold.

As for Book Reviews, he has fixed ideas about what he is going to read, and don't let anyone try to influence him to the contrary.

The average reader isn't a moron or anything as drastic as that. He simply isn't amenable to change. Change implies new ideas, movement, get-up-and-go, and he'll fight tooth and nail to resist designs on his inertia, and he'll have the vast majority of people to back him up.

Change is the life-blood of science-fiction. We are not content with the portrayal of life as it is, but rather, life as it might be. Contemporary society scorns science fiction and its adherents, while we laugh up our sleeves. Under its nose, science and technology are implementing the basic stuff of science fiction every other day. Astronautics, embracing, as it does, many disciplines, is an obvious example.

The various items having been demolished from the magazine, a line-up of stories is left. The average reader opens it at page one. Immediately, a haze of new concepts, words and images fogs his brain pan. Page two might remain a mystery to him.

The Galactic Survey team of the Laings and Hunters are back with another puzzling alien-world adventure. (See "Who Went Where?" in No. 124)

Inductive Reaction

by **RUSS MARKHAM**

Lola and Ellis Hunter entered the ground floor vestibule of the Galactic Union Survey Building together, and made their way towards the receptionist who worked solely to the personal instructions of Marvin Conte. The sign above the girl's open-fronted office bore the simple but explicit legend, 'DIRECTOR'S ENQUIRIES.' Around the remainder of the circular hall were other, equally spaced chambers, each supervised by an attractive blonde girl. Together, they were a striking testimony to Conte's belief that blondes can also have brains. Before a girl could become the Director's receptionist, she had to graduate through all the booths on the ground floor and know the department covered by each thoroughly.

"Good-morning, Grace," said Ellis, "is it all right for us to go up?"

The girl's eyes flickered over the clock-face sunk in the desk before her. "You're due in with the Director in three minutes. Mr. and Mrs. Laing went up a few minutes ago—you've cut it rather fine."

"Nonsense," replied Hunter with a joviality which belied his words, "you know as well as I do, that . . ."

"It takes only thirty seconds to go up—yes I know," finished Grace. "Off you go then." She pressed a button on a small console set near the edge of the desk, and the doors to the grav-shaft alongside her office slid silently apart.

Lola and Ellis entered, the doors closing behind them. The toroidal grav-coil which was embedded in the walls of the shaft became energised by the closing doors and the couple's confirming weight on the floor-plate contact, and began the first step in the sequence which lifted them from coil to coil and floor to floor at a gentle fifteen miles an hour until they were fifty stories up. Once opposite the entrance to Conte's suite, the final coil held them firmly in mid-air while a section of floor slid beneath their feet, lowered them on to it, and then opened the exit door to the Director's outer office.

Waiting for them were Kim and Dave Laing. The two groups of partners greeted one another, and immediately began swapping details of their last leave. Although both couples had gone to Switzerland after their last tour of duty on the arid furnace of Palladia II, they had split up to different resorts, realising that a break from each other's company was just as sensible as a change of environment.

A soft chime interrupted their conversation and the doors to the Director's inner sanctum moved invitingly apart. Conte came to meet them, shook hands all around, and showed them to chairs. He didn't look quite as calm as he normally did, his hesitation showing even more as he fiddled with the controls of the bank of small telescreens before him.

The Special Survey team members exchanged baffled glances while Conte fidgetted. At length he spoke. "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you—I've got to split you up."

"Split us up?" echoed the four in unison. "Why?"

Conte raised a temporising hand. "It's not what you think. I propose sending Ellis and Dave on a mission without Lola and Kim. After that you can join forces again, so it's only a temporary schism."

Kim and Lola, however, were not easy to placate. The little red-head spoke for them both and bluntly. "Why can't we go too?"

Conte was equally forthright. "It's a dangerous mission—exceedingly so."

Kim's hazel eyes flashed back at him. "Aren't they all?"

"To the extent of uncertain environments and conditions, yes, but this time I have the added complication of unpredictable natives as well."

"How unpredictable?" chipped in Lola.

The Director sighed a little helplessly and spread his hands. Sometimes he wondered if the Special Survey teams formed of two married couples were such a good idea after all—admittedly the balanced group solved almost all personal and technical difficulties on prolonged spells of duty—but the female members could be a trifle obdurate on occasions, and this looked like being one of them.

"I'll give it you straight," said Conte. "The survey team covering the Oris system observed intelligent life on planet IV, and before Ellis asks where this system is, I'll tell you that it's a hundred and eighty-three light-years out, and almost diametrically opposite to your last port of call, Palladia.

"Oris IV is a jungle world with a cloud layer looking not unlike the way Venus's used to, so they had to skim down quite close to the surface. They observed clearings, and villages in them with humanoid inhabitants. With that point settled, they withdrew and carried on with the work of looking over the other five planets, which are uninhabited, and called in the Initial Contact Section.

"The I.C. team brought their ship down at the edge of one of the largest clearings, being careful not to cause any unnecessary damage. As is standard procedure, the manoeuvre was completed under cover of darkness so that there was no panic created among the natives. In the morning, the Contact team sat tight, waiting for the locals to collect once the ship was observed. At first, it looked as if everything was going according to the book, a few Orisians coming over to view the new object. But their interest was very short-lived. After only the most cursory of glances, they ignored the intruder completely and went about their business.

"The team thought this over, and decided that the disinterest might be a gambit to get *them* to come out where the could be got at. There was nothing to be served by staying in the ship so they came out warily, expecting a trap and maybe a sudden attack. A few natives were very near when they opened the exit port, and the change in their attitude was startling. They dropped to their knees and gave every evidence of servility."

"An unusual reaction indeed," commented Dave Laing. "One might have expected such worship if they had shown some veneration for the ship itself—but to ignore one and fawn over the others is peculiar in the extreme."

"Exactly what the team thought," agreed Conte, "and what followed was even more uncanny."

"Feeling suspicious about the whole attitude of the Orisians, they were careful in the next few days to carry arms, there was no sense in taking foolish risks in such a situation. But the Orisians gave no grounds for alarm, being almost grovelling in their attitude towards our personnel. Gradually, the Contact boys relaxed, they even discarded their side-arms, thinking that the natives were scared of these—and while they were in such a state of funk it was completely impossible to start communication with them."

"Either the natives got used to our people or it *was* an act, because they slowly became more normal. A big ceremony was arranged for the giving of presents which our team hoped would cement a friendship. A group sat outside the ship, completely unarmed and surrounded by gifts. The natives approached from the village, encouraged by the smiles and gestures of the waiting men."

"Once the Orisians got within ten yards, their attitude changed abruptly, and without any warning, they attacked with knives and axes. Six men were butchered before they could move. Even the men inside the ship were taken by surprise, so unexpected was the treacherous attack. They opened up with guns and drove the natives off, but the slaughter had been completed, every member of the unarmed group was dead."

"What happened next?" queried Ellis, fascinated in spite of the horror of the events described.

Conte resumed his narrative. "The I.C. team decided to try again at another village, well away from the first one, rather than try to establish themselves by the force of superior weapons. They reasoned that either the first lot of villagers were a particularly antagonistic bunch, or that they had unwittingly violated some taboo, possibly by landing the ship near the village itself. Anyway, they touched down in a naturally open area of rocky ground about half a mile or so from another community and trekked through the jungle to it."

"This time they were hyper-careful and ultra-suspicious, carrying weapons always and having a number of guards

always at the ready. They tried rounding up natives one at a time and interviewing them in a position of complete safety. They got nowhere; the individuals who they roped in practically gibbered with friendliness and cringing subservience."

"Perhaps the second lot of Orisians had been warned by the consequences of duplicity by the first lot," suggested Ellis.

"How?" questioned Conte, drily. "The new contact was on a different continent and the natives are not seafarers, and even if they were, they couldn't have covered the distance in the intervening time."

"Telepathy?" offered Lola.

"How many times have we met it?" countered the Director.

"None," she admitted.

"And you *know* it's unlikely that we ever will," said Conte. "Research has definitely shown that the electrical activity of the brain is of such a low intensity that it will require considerable amplification to propagate a message over any distance—once we've sorted out what to amplify. And besides," he continued, "there was no indication that the Orisians had anything other than the spoken word, and certainly no technology to write home about."

"It's an interesting situation certainly," said Dave Laing. "I can understand why you don't want to involve the girls."

"Who's side are you on?" demanded his wife, her mood matching the colour of her hair. "You know very well that Lola and I are every bit as accurate with a gun as you two," she gestured at Dave and Ellis, "and possibly even a little faster on the draw too."

"True enough," agreed Dave, "but . . ."

"But nothing," said Lola firmly, supporting Kim's view. "We go as a team or we don't go at all."

Ellis wisely decided to stay out of the controversy, while Marvin Conte exerted all of his considerable charm on the two militant wives—and failed to move them one inch.

Eventually, after a great deal of argument, the Director agreed that the team as a whole could go to Oris IV, but he extracted a firm promise that the two men would observe the maximum precautions to protect their wives.

Twenty-four hours later, the quartet were en route to the G.U.S. interstellar satellite station circling the Earth in a 5000 mile orbit, a satellite which hung on the fringe of space for

one purposes only—to provide a transfer point for incoming and outgoing teams. There were always one or two of the deep-space cylinders arriving or departing, loading or unloading, their cylindrical outlines looking like so many giant oil drums—they were hardly beautiful from an aesthetic point of view—but what use was streamlining to a vessel which plied the interstellar vacuum?

The two couples trans-shipped from the grav-ferry to the faster-than-light ship which would be their home for the next thirteen days, days which would seem quite normal to the occupants, encased as they would be in a Temporal Stasis field which completely nullified the Einstein effect that would otherwise have made time travel backwards.

Outside the ship, weird Doppler and reverse Doppler effects would be visible to an observer, but after a first curious glance on their initial trip into deep space, no-one was anxious to take a second look at the crawling kaleidoscope of deformed, visible radiation which distorted the black velvet of infinity at trans-light velocities.

So accurate was the navigation of the Union transport vessel, that it threaded the cosmic needle and arrived on schedule within a million miles of its remote target, Oris IV. Automatic detectors located its orbiting sister, and within hours the Special Survey team joined forces with their Initial Contact brethren.

Lewis Landon, the chief of the I.C. team welcomed them aboard. He was obviously disappointed that the personnel under his control had not made any headway in their attempts at intelligent contact with the natives of planet IV, but very sensibly realised that maybe a set of non-specialists might spot where I.C. had gone wrong. Even if the visitors couldn't solve the problem, *he* at least, would be relieved from holding a troublesome baby for a while.

"Would you like some refreshments before we start explaining things to you?" he offered.

Ellis replied for them all. "That's very nice of you Lew, but we've had thirteen days of twiddling our thumbs, I think we'd like to get cracking on our mutual problem if you don't mind."

Landon was grateful for Hunter's use of the word 'mutual,' it showed that the Special Survey people considered themselves

as helpers ready to co-operate, rather than rivals out to make him look small for not having solved the problem.

Hunter continued speaking. "I think we're going to need a lot of assistance from your lads, Lew, after all, if you were in difficulties, I'm sure we will be. Still, maybe together we can crack it."

Landon brightened even more under the influence of the diplomatic approach. "I sincerely hope so. Well, to work. As you will have noticed during your approach, the Orisian primary is slightly smaller than Sol, but what it lacks in size it certainly makes up for with output. It's a blue-white, high-energy star radiating well into the shorter wavebands as well as the infra-red and the visible stuff in between.

"The two inner planets have had their atmospheres blasted away long ago so that their surfaces are being perpetually roasted.

"Number three is a hotter version of Mars, with only a thin atmosphere.

"Oris IV is larger than the first three, and the extra gravitational pull coupled with its greater distance from the primary has made it possible for it to retain a very substantial atmosphere." Landon adjusted a viewscreen which brought a clear picture of the planet before them. It glowed fleecily, the cloud layer reflecting back a high proportion of the light received from its sun. Occasionally, a momentary break would appear in the all-enveloping clouds, but the glimpse of the surface which it afforded was far too transitory to observe any clear details.

"Any particular peculiarities about the atmosphere?" queried Dave.

"The oxygen content is about five per cent up on Earth normal, and, of course, the vapour density is always high, otherwise nothing significant. Oh, I forgot one thing, although it may not be of interest—the planet's equivalents of our Heaviside and Appleton layers are extremely intense—again due to the amount of short-wave stuff being squirted out by Oris itself.

"Surface gravity is a fraction over Terran normal, but the extra oxygen compensates, so you shouldn't find that worrying you.

"There are two continents, each about the size of Africa with scads of ocean between them.

"Vegetation is profuse, which accounts for the extra oxygen. Anything else you'd like to know?" Landon brought his staccato sentences to a temporary halt, raising interrogatory eyebrows and accentuating the slightly glassy look which the contact lenses gave to his pale blue eyes.

"What about the language down below, do you have enough of it mastered for simple conversations?" asked Kim.

"Yes, I'll send one of our linguists with you when you go planetside. Would you like any more of my staff to join your party?"

Ellis considered matters for a few moments. "Can your linguist pilot a gravshuttle?"

"No," said the I.C. team commander, "he's strictly a language expert."

"In that case, we'll borrow one of your pilots as well. I think the six of us will do for an initial foray at least. How soon can your men be ready to leave?"

"Will two hours do?"

"Make it one," said Ellis, "we've got a fair idea of the background details, I'd like to take a closer look at the foreground."

The winged shape of the gravshuttle dropped away from the orbiting mother ship and dipped its slender nose towards the cotton-wool masses below. From a distance, their frozenly undulant upper surface appeared solid enough to smash the shuttle to scrap metal if it dared to try and penetrate to the secrets hidden beneath the vapourous battlements of the sky.

As the streamlined vessel ventured nearer, the apparent solidity of the cloud layer abruptly dissolved and became a wispiest mass of lethargically flexing tendrils which beckoned the intruder towards their filmy embrace.

Quite suddenly, the craft was plunging into a formless fog which grew noticeably muddier looking as the planetary surface drew nearer.

Seth Philips the pilot, put the craft on auto-control, and its destiny rested entirely with the twin probing fingers of radar and sonar beams. In spite of the confidence which all of the group had in their guidance system, everyone looked tensely at the blips dancing ever faster across a cathode ray tube, while the pinging, insistent voice of sonar chimed its comment more and more often. Gravity nullifiers greedily sucked more power into their weird converters and slowed the rate of their descent to that of a thistledown.

The greyish mists attenuated and disappeared. All around the gravshuttle, the air was as clear as it had ever been on Oris IV. Immediately below, a rocky outcrop thrust its moss-pocked surface out through the sprawling, questing jungle and into the murky light of pre-dawn.

Six humans simultaneously released long-held breath in a mutual sigh of relief when the gravshuttle's spring-loaded legs touched down, and all devices unobtrusively switched themselves off.

Ellis was the first to speak after the landing on Oris IV. "I think Dave and I could do with a morning constitutional, Paul," he said to the Initial Contact team's linguist. "How about showing us the second village which you visited?"

The short, round-faced man nodded agreeably. "We've just about nice time to get over to it before dawn. The natives are never around before then."

"And what are we going to do?" asked Lola. "I didn't hear our names mentioned."

Her husband inclined his head. "That's right. You and Kim are going to stay put here until we've given things a look over. That was what we promised the Director, now wasn't it?"

Kim took up the attack. "But that doesn't mean we have to stay shut up in the ship does it?"

"No," replied Dave soothingly, "but it wouldn't be very sensible for all of us to go at once, either—so you girls stay here with Seth and keep in touch with us on short-wave—somebody's got to do it."

Both girls reluctantly agreed that what Dave said made sense, and their original determination to go with their husbands turned immediately to concern for their well-being when they realised that an all-male trio would make the first sortie.

Each of the three men wore a pair of the hundred shot machine pistols on his belt, and carried an assortment of various nerve gas capsules that were small enough to be flicked towards a target by a thumb and forefinger.

Paul Cameron paused before opening the shuttle's exit port. "In case I'm wrong about there being any Orisians around, be on the *qui vive*—they *are* an unpredictable crowd."

The door slid open and the green-smelling, Turkish-bath atmosphere of Oris IV forced its way into the air-conditioned cabin.

Beads of sweat almost instantly started to form on their foreheads at the hairline and the nape of their necks.

Hunter stepped out into the dense, aqueous gases of the planet and flicked away the first of the salty droplets beginning to trickle down his face. Already, his shirt was beginning to stick to his back.

They strode along in silence for about fifty yards, following a track which twisted its way between dripping pale-green vegetation bewildering in its variety.

"We'd better check our radios before we go any further," suggested Cameron. "I'll call the ship first, then you two can follow." He touched one of the seemingly ornamental studs on his waist-belt and spoke to the empty air. "Cameron calling shuttle—do you receive me?"

Dave and Ellis activated their transceivers in time to hear the voice of Seth Philips come quite clearly from the twin speakers concealed in their epaulette badges: "Shuttle to Cameron—loud and clear." When the pilot stopped speaking, there was absolute silence but for the tiny wash of the carrier wave. No cosmic static marred the perfect transmission conditions.

When Hunter and Dave Laing had both asked the same laconic question, and received the same reassuring answer from Philips, Ellis remarked on the absence of random radio noise.

The pilot's disembodied voice answered the question like an invisible, shoulder-borne mentor.

"It's because of Oris IV's perfect 'radio mirror.' The reflecting layers in and above the atmosphere are so highly energised by the primary that virtually nothing can get through from extra-planetary sources. And as you have been told, the Orisians have not got a technology remotely near to inventing radio—hence, no interference signals."

"I see," said Ellis, "thank you for the information. We're moving on now, and will leave all our sets switched on. Don't speak to us unless you have to, we may wish to do a bit of surreptitious spying without the Orisians knowing we're watching them."

"Message understood," replied Philips briefly, "the air is all yours."

Before they went farther, Ellis voiced a thought which had come into his mind.

"Paul," he said, "I'd like to have a look at the natives without them being able to see us—kind of size them up while

they're engaged in some normal activity. Their behaviour when humans are around seems so peculiar that we need some sort of yard-stick to be able to assess what is usual and what isn't. Is there any easy way in which we can do that?"

Cameron replied almost immediately.

"The village is out for anything like that because their huts are arranged in a closely-knit ring around a central clearing. From outside the ring, we would only get fragmentary glimpses of anything going on inside, and if we went close enough to see between the dwellings, we would risk being spotted ourselves."

"So we've had it, have we?" commented Dave.

The linguist smiled. "Not quite—I was only telling you where we couldn't go—there is something else left. Over to our right is another open area similar to the one where we landed. The rock there isn't quite so near the surface and as a result there is nearly a foot of topsoil, enough for grasses to grow. Most mornings a group of natives sets off to do a bit of hunting there. And it has a nice, rocky bluff handy where we can watch them in action and stay out of sight ourselves—will that do?"

"Sounds perfect," agreed Ellis. "Lead on McDuff."

"You've got the wrong clan, but I get your message," said the jovial little man. "Forward about a hundred yards, then take the right fork."

The trio trudged on through the sodden jungle, following the barely-discernible trail which wound around tree-boles and over questing roots. Gradually, it grew lighter. By the time they had reached the edge of the clearing, dawn had broken, so that the clouds to the east appeared somewhat lighter than elsewhere.

In a ragged, unwilling manner, the dense growth thinned out to odd bushes, and then gave way completely to a half-mile diameter area where thigh-length grasses reigned supreme. About one-third of the way around to the left, a bare, rocky mass had thrust its naked self out of the layer of pale-green vegetable life. The side nearest the jungle was a steep but not impossible ridge, while that towards the miniature prairie was sheer and precipitous.

"It won't be long now," said Cameron, "so we'd better not waste any time. Keep in amongst the scrub fringe and make your way towards the rock; and spread out a bit so that we don't leave an obvious route map to show them we've been here."

His advice, though prudent, was guarding against something very unlikely, as the spongy growth underfoot resumed its virginal appearance almost as soon as their feet were lifted from it. In the more open country, they made rapid progress towards and up the ridge, reaching the top, sweat-soaked but triumphant, a few seconds before a silent group of ten Orisians emerged from the jungle trail.

The natives spread out into an evenly-spaced arc of men, who stood quietly as if listening for a few moments, before moving forward.

All three men on the bluff took out field-glasses and watched with interest. The Orisians were about five feet six tall with olive-coloured skins, most of which was in sight, as they wore only brief loin-cloths. Dave and Ellis had been observing them for several minutes before they realised that the two, upthrust, mothlike antenna rising from the lank hair above the forehead, were not ornaments attached to an encircling band, but part of the natives' body.

"What are the feelers on their heads, Paul?" asked Dave.

Cameron shook his head. "We don't know what purpose they serve any more than we know what the similar things are for on our own moths and butterflies. Every lepidopterist back home has his own theory, so pity the explorer who has just seen them adorning humanoids on a new planet."

The hunting party's formation down below altered as they advanced. The original semi-circle of evenly-spaced natives became more parabolic in outline the farther they went.

Dave Laing, struck by a sudden suspicion, swept his binoculars along a line starting at the centre of the curve and passing forward mid-way between the outer horns of the parabola. Plainly visible, some two hundred yards ahead, he could see what looked like a deer. The animal was crouched well down in the tall grass, its legs folded neatly beneath it, and evidently believed itself to be completely concealed. While in a position to be easily observed from the bluff, equally obviously it could not be seen by anyone of normal height walking through the grasses below, *yet the Orisians were marching purposefully, but quietly forward, as if they knew exactly where the animal was.*

Quietly, Dave pointed out the salient facts to his companions.

Without any sounds or gestures being exchanged, the native formation went forward until the men at the centre of their hunting curve were about twenty yards from their unsuspecting quarry. At that point, they paused, while the outermost walkers continued to advance, gradually swinging inwards until they halted, evenly-spaced and in an almost perfect circle with the deer at the centre.

Then inexorably, the circle contracted, each of the Orisians holding a slender spear pointing inwards at the ready. They were within ten feet of the doomed creature before it became aware of them. It had time to look around despairingly for only a few seconds before five swiftly-despatched spears put it out of its hopeless dilemma.

The change in the hitherto silent hunters was abrupt. While the spear owners were withdrawing their weapons from the quivering corpse, the others were grinning, laughing, and slapping each other triumphantly on the chests.

"What do you think of that?" asked Cameron, an almost proprietorial satisfaction on his round face.

Ellis and Dave both had admiration and wonder written large upon their countenances.

"Very slick," commented Dave.

"How the devil was it done?" added Ellis more pointedly.

The linguist spread his hands in a manner completely foreign to his Scots ancestry.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I've seen them do it before with a variety of animals, and it's only rarely that one gets away—but whether it's sound or scent that they are guided by, I still can't decide."

"It looked more like radar to me," mused Dave, still baffled.

Down in the clearing, the natives had dismembered the choicest portions of their prey and were moving back towards the jungle again.

Three jackal-like creatures were emerging from the scrub and sticking their pointed noses in the air—it was obvious, as they descended upon the remains, that a sense of smell was their guiding force.

Over the course of the next three days, the trio made several more trips to watch the Orisians. Sometimes they went right into the village itself and held conversations of sorts, with Cameron acting as the middle-man and interpreting for everyone. Always, the villagers were obsequious to the point of

servility, and Dave and Ellis's wary suspicion began to seem unfounded even with the knowledge of what had happened to the original Initial Contact team. Only when the humans' carefully concealed attitude of jumpy readiness to fight began to evaporate, did the olive-skinned aliens start to seem more natural with their visitors.

After two further days of regular visits and conversations, the men even consented to their two wives paying a short trip to the colony of bee-hive shaped huts. While Kim and Lola walked around the village, their men hovered at the fringe of the little group trying to look in all directions at once. But the Orisians seemed genuinely pleased to see the girls among them, and were more fawning in their attention than they had been for the previous two days.

That night at supper in the shuttle's little mess-room, they discussed the matter at some length.

"I'm beginning to think you must have contravened some unwritten law on that first contact, Paul," said Ellis.

"It could have been anything—landing the ship near their village, the sight of the ship itself, or even offering them gifts for that matter."

"We've gone over all the events dozens of times," answered Cameron. "Any of the things you've quoted *could* have been the cause, or any one of a score of others. One thing is certain, if it was a taboo that we violated, it wasn't obvious to us."

"Yet, whatever the mistake was, we don't seem to have made it, so far," offered Dave Laing. "It's like walking a tight-rope over a snake-pit, one false move and we're in it up to our necks."

Paul Cameron was in a confiding mood.

"If you want my opinion," he said, "the first lot we met were a treacherous bunch by nature. I don't think these are—but how can we be sure?"

"Personally," remarked Lola, "I don't trust them."

"Apparently, when Dave and Ellis were there yesterday, the Orisians were fairly relaxed, yet when we go in today with you two watching them like hawks, they bend over backwards to be friendly. It was almost as if they had reacted in a way calculated to reassure you, knowing that you were a bit trigger-happy."

"Yes," concurred Kim. "Are we *sure* that they're not telepathic?"

"I'm sure you can definitely rule that out," said the linguist firmly. "They've got a well developed language which wouldn't be at all necessary with telepathy a fact, and besides, the electrical activity of the brain . . ."

"We know," interrupted Ellis. "Its power is too low to be propagated very far—Conte explained it all before we left."

"You know," he continued tangentially, "I think we should ask them point-blank why the first lot acted like they did. And tomorrow night might be just the chance to do it."

"What's so special about tomorrow night?" asked his wife.

Ellis hesitated. "We three have been invited to a jamboree in the village and we've accepted."

She looked at him incredulously. "You've accepted?"

"Yes," he said a little uncomfortably. "This *is* the first time anyone has been invited to a village function as far as we know—it might show a full acceptance of us by the Orisians—so we said that we would go."

Kim too, was incensed. "You mean to say that you are crazy enough to go into *their* village, at a time selected by *them*, and on *their* terms?" she demanded of her tall husband.

He reddened. "It seemed like the right thing to do. We're not getting anywhere at the moment, maybe if we participate in their life we'd get to understand them better."

The two girls exchanged looks of suffering patience and said one more word simultaneously: "Men!" Then they stalked out.

Before they left for the village the next evening, Dave, Ellis and Paul Cameron filled their pockets with the little nerve-gas capsules and checked that their guns were loaded. Seth Philips and the two girls made them promise to keep their radios on at all times so that the three in the shuttle could monitor everything and come to the rescue if there was the least sign of things hotting-up.

Lola and Kim, with sudden nightmares of becoming young widows were particularly jumpy.

Eventually, all preparations were finished and the three men set off, pausing half-way to check that all was well on the communication side of things. As on every previous occasion, reception and transmission were perfect.

When they arrived at the edge of the village clearing after tramping through the hot-house moistness of the jungle, the lowering darkness unrelieved by stars or moon, had almost

convinced them to turn back. But waiting for them, carrying pottery lamps holding a wick floating in a pool of animal fat, were a group of Orisians. They looked like a cluster of friendly fire-flies, and backed away towards their village lighting the way for the visiting humans.

Warily the trio followed, and were ushered to chairs placed right in the centre of the communal circle. All three loosened the guns in their holsters and patted their pockets of capsules.

The natives put on a good show, singing and dancing in the light of a ring of fires which they had managed to light with carefully dried materials. After about half an hour of noisy festivities which Cameron translated as meaning: 'Welcome to our village you strangers from Outside the World,' a string of the prettiest girls there brought up platters of assorted delicacies and offered them around.

"Take something from each one," counselled Cameron, "whether you like it or not."

Certain of the food was delicious, while other items looked and tasted nauseating. Eventually, the numerous courses ended, much to the relief of all three, but then the girls eddied forward again with gourds of something to drink.

Ellis looked at his suspiciously. "D'you think it's all right?" he queried hoarsely to the linguist.

Cameron had been bolder and tasted his. "Go ahead," he advised, licking his lips and taking another deep draught. "It's strawberry flavoured and as innocuous as mother's milk."

The other two followed his example and enjoyed what they drank, particularly the pleasant, cooling sensation of the liquid as it washed away some of the dubious flavours left in their mouths by the earlier courses.

"You know, Dave," confided Ellis, "this stuff would make a dam' good export if it can be made in quantity."

"You're dead right, Ellish," agreed his partner reaching for another gourd, "these people have a fine sense of hospitality."

"It's even better than Scotch," said Cameron in an awed voice. He grinned wickedly, "lesh make a night of it shall we?"

The liquid which they had already consumed seemed to promote an agreeable appetite for more, so the three guests loosened their uncomfortable gun belts and prepared to relax and enjoy the gyrating native dance which had started up again.

Soon, they were nodding their heads in drunken time to the stamp of feet and the insidious throb of the drums.

At the end of one particularly energetic number, Cameron lurched to his feet, all suspicion gone, his face radiant with fatuous friendship, and his mind buzzing with the ambassadorial speech of good fellowship which he felt impelled to make. Beside him, Dave and Ellis clapped their hands in maudlin approval and shouted : " Speech ! " An aura of alcoholic bonhomie radiated from them.

There was a moment of shocked silence, then the Orisians reached for their axes, spears, and knives and surged towards their guests in a suddenly murderous mood. Before they got within striking distance, however, there was another unexpected interruption. Three lances of chattering fire clove the air, and three handfuls of thin glass capsules shattered in the circle. The natives paused long enough in their mad rush to inhale some of the invisible miasma of nerve gases, and instantly keeled over in a stupor far more potent and paralytic even than that produced by the strawberry flavoured liquor.

A sudden and almost ear shattering silence descended on the fire-lit clearing. Three gas-masked figures strode forward from the jungle and were lords of all they surveyed.

Dave Laing and Ellis Hunter lolled unconsciously in their chairs, the vacant smiles fixed upon their faces, while Paul Cameron sprawled flat on his back, arms still spread in their all-enveloping gesture of good-will.

Kim, Lola, and Seth Philips each produced a loaded hypodermic from their belts and selected a victim. The injections quickly nullified the effect of the nerve-gas and rapidly restored the formerly unconscious trio to their previous state of drunken good humour. Then they were led away through the jungle, bawling out-of-tune choruses of Clementine, which had remained the all-time favourite of revellers throughout the centuries.

Conte looked across his desk and nodded at Dave and Ellis.

" I'll bet you two won't hear the last of that for some time to come," he said.

" They won't," said Lola, " although, to be fair, it did provide the clue which solved the whole problem of the Orisians' peculiar behaviour."

" How so ? " questioned Conte.

"Well," answered Ellis, "after we'd recovered from the father and mother of all hangovers, we managed to make sense of the whole thing. You see, the natives' attitude was always one of an opposite nature to ours—when we were hostile and wary of them, they were friendly and trusting towards us, and vice versa."

"But exactly how and why did it occur?" demanded the perplexed Director.

"It was due to brain activity as Lola had suspected when you were briefing us before we left," said Kim, "but it wasn't *telepathy*, it was *empathy*. And it wasn't even straight-forward empathy, but the effect reversed."

"Dave," appealed Conte, "can you give it to me in plain English?"

"Sure," grinned the tall man, who had been secretly enjoying Conte's attempts to sort out the tangled skein of explanations. "You know that there is a principle in engineering called 'Electromagnetic Induction'?"

The Director marred his already corrugated brow even more. "Vaguely—how does it go again?"

Laing was fully serious now.

"If an insulated coil of wire is in fairly close proximity to another coil, and an alternating or varying current passes through the first one, there is induced in the second coil a similar current. This induced current, however, is completely out of phase or opposite in value to the first one at any and every instant.

"Now consider us as being the first coil, and the Orisians the second. Whatever mood we were in, induced an opposite one in them of equal intensity."

"And this was done electrically?" questioned Conte, his eyes gleaming.

Dave nodded, keeping his expression carefully innocent.

"Then why weren't your brain's electrical activity and the feeble waves given off by them swamped by other cosmic static before it could travel any significant distance?" asked the long-suffering man.

Laing smiled. "This is the first planet we've ever known which had a perfect 'radio mirror' all around it—and I do mean perfect. It meant that there were literally *no* electromagnetic waves other than light being propagated in the Oris IV's atmosphere except for those from our communicators,

which were of the wrong wavelength. All that existed were those being radiated by ourselves and certain animals.

"The Orisian natives had developed the faculty of receiving animal transmissions and using them to locate their prey. Of course, they didn't know how they did it, but natural selection saw to it that the best hunters survived because they ate the most regular meals.

"It also appears that we are particularly good transmitters on the wavelength which they can receive."

"So we are forever barred from safe contact with them," stated Conte a little despondently.

"No," contradicted Ellis, "all that is needed is to screen our brain radiations from the Orisians so that they can't be picked up by them. That's a pretty simple problem to solve. A thin helmet of soft iron will do the trick and there'll be nothing in it to go wrong. We can then meet them without causing any inductive reaction, favourable or otherwise."

Conte was a glutton for punishment and spoke once again.

"I can understand how the Orisians picked up animal and human broadcasts via their antenna," he said, "but why don't they receive from each other?"

"It must be a matter of body chemistry," said Kim, "and short of dissecting one of them, we don't know the exact mechanism at this stage. We suspect, however, that it is probably accomplished by having their own built-in static in the form of parasitic currents circulating on the surface of their skulls and masking what's underneath. Maybe some E.E.G. tests would clear the matter up."

Lola gave the final message from the Special Survey team before they left for another spell of well-earned leave.

"If ever you have the opportunity of sampling the Orisian jungle juice," she concluded, "take plenty of water with it."

"Thank you, my dear," answered Conte urbanely, and made a mental note to do the exact opposite; there were times when he felt like something strong to drink.

Russ Markham

On a planet with no rainfall, the big
mystery was where the moisture
came from to feed the rivers.
Solve that problem and the place
would be ideal.

A Q U E D U C T

by FRANCIS G. RAYER

The beetles rose slowly at first, heavy with maturity. As they gained height their speed increased, until the combined vibration of millions of wings filled the sky with humming. Shallow patches of water, the only seas the planet had, dropped behind.

Other flights of beetles were already in the air, forming great luminous clouds obscuring the stars. Driven by instinct as old as life itself, the huge clouds sped northwards, shining in the dark. The beetles were weighty with the burden of their full growth, but moved rapidly. They had oval bodies, small legs and mandibles, and strong wings spreading from under horny cases. At the centres of the clouds, they were closely packed as wasps in a flying swarm, so that their beating wings almost touched as they swept on under the night sky.

As the small planet rotated, other flights rose with evening, starting up from the small seas, joining the hum of their wings to that of clouds of beetles already moving inland. All round the planet, as evening came and the sun of the Canis Ven area sank, masses of flying beetles rose, glinting in the evening, luminous in darkness, so that the night sky was filled with patches of light moving on their courses across the heavens.

The patches of luminous green drifting north in the sky faded as the dawn light gained strength over the hills east of the river. Bill Cartwright dropped his cigarette stub in the grey, sandy earth. The green patches fascinated him—always had, since the day five months before when he had first stepped from the cargo ship to the arid ground. He never forgot how far they were from Earth, out here on the little planet at the periphery of a modest system round a small sun in Canis Ven.

The cool air had a peculiar dryness—it always had. In those five months no rain fell. Worse, in the previous two years of exploratory settlement by a group sent to map the area, there had been no rain.

"Wondering where they all go, Bill?" a girl's voice asked.

Bill nodded. "The lantern beetles? Don't tell me you got up early to see them."

"I didn't." Lindy Wells laughed briefly. She had come up the rocky, awkward path from the river, and was flushed. "I worked late last night and had a headache. Twenty minutes outside is the best cure."

Bill nodded. "Still being hounded?"

"You could put it that way. Perhaps I deserve it."

Bill shook his sandy head. "I've never been on a planet where everything turned out easy, Lindy. Back on Earth, you had generations of prior knowledge to draw on. That helps, especially when studying animals or insects. What's more, on Earth you investigate something from your own habitat, or at least indigenous to the planet on which humanity arose. Out here, it's all different. No prior knowledge to draw on, no conformity to natural laws we take for granted. Nobody can expect you to produce a natural history report in a couple of months."

"Major Stanton does," Lindy said acidly.

Bill grimaced. "Let him shout for it!"

The sun would soon be up. Bill could see down into the river, with its clear, steady current. Fifteen miles south the river discharged into a small, shallow sea. Across the river was a sandstone rise, and beyond was a dip, once the channel of the river, but now dry, due to its changed course. Beyond the dry dip was Sand Flat, the first settlement area, scantily occupied by technicians. Lindy Wells followed his gaze, a spark in her blue eyes.

"Are you behind too?" she asked.

"A bit. And Stanton breathing on my back doesn't help. The aqueduct to take water across the dry channel has to be fifteen hundred feet long, and it's a hundred feet above the old dry bed, at one point. There's also the cutting through the rise between the river and its old course, which was a big job."

"You think it's worth it?"

"Everyone does. We reckon to win about five hundred square miles of good, useful land, with this aqueduct. When the river followed the old channel, a few thousand years ago, that land was fertile. It will be again. That much crop-bearing land is worth a lot, out here."

She nodded, her dark hair swinging. She raised her smoothly contoured face towards the sky. "Was the rainfall always zero, Bill?"

"I believe so." He studied the sky, now blue from horizon to horizon. In five months he had not seen a cloud. The air was cool but dry. "The sea area is very small. There's no sign of vegetation except along watercourses. Ninety-five per cent of the planet's surface is arid. That accounts for their being few animals, no birds. We need to make the most of this river, Lindy, and the aqueduct will do that."

She nodded. "Major Stanton wants me to produce some method of clearing the locality of the lantern beetles."

"Can't see they do much harm, myself," Bill objected. He was all for leaving things as they were, when it came to interference with indigenous life.

They went down the rocky slope to the river. It was of moderate depth, not fast flowing. Water was scarce. The river rose amid thickly vegetated slopes three hundred miles north, and had not been much investigated. The urgent need was to get the useful land beyond the rise into production.

A temporary bridge crossed the river. The other side was the sandstone rise, and beyond that, the old bed of the river, now dry for a thousand years. The cutting was finished, the aqueduct nearly so. Within a month, water should be flowing through the rise cutting, across the aqueduct, and out over the dust-dry but fertile land beyond.

Sand Flat was half a mile from the aqueduct, a mass of huts, stores and temporary buildings. A lot of men and heavy plant had been needed to build the aqueduct. It was a

huge trough forty feet wide and fifteen deep, and ready to carry a large part of the river waters when sluices in the river course were closed.

They rode in Bill's dusty, battered truck. The rough road went a little way down along the river bank, before rising slightly towards the camp. A compact building near the sluices came into view.

"Still having trouble with the water filtering?" Bill asked.

"Some." Lindy looked over him towards the building.

"But we'll succeed. I've never seen water with so much animalculea life! The new plan is a big, coarse rotating filter to remove nine-tenths of the sludge, then extra filtering when needed."

"Sounds reasonable."

Bill dropped her near the filter and pump building, and drove towards the aqueduct. The sun was up, but only a dim outline. Scanning the sky, he noted that a huge, silvery cloud extended over half the eastern heavens. Lantern beetles.

The sky had darkened appreciably when he reached the aqueduct, and an occasional beetle was clicking against the truck windscreen. They were the size of small beans, with wings that shone silver when extended, and luminous undersides that glowed in the night sky, when uncounted billions flitted over.

Bill was pleased with the aqueduct, built as far as possible from pounded rock, easily blasted in great quantities from hills only a few miles away. The original river bed had not been deep, but lay in a cleft, and the aqueduct was long. It was supported on reinforced concrete pillars, almost complete.

A large-built man in dusty blue overalls came from the group shifting form-work from one of the pillars. He had iron grey hair and a wrinkled, kindly face. He put one foot on the truck step when Bill halted, dusting his trousers.

"I'm a concreter, not a bug-hunter, Bill," he said.

Bill got down. "Who says you aren't, Ned?" Mace was a great worker, getting results, not making mistakes.

"Major Stanton." Ned pulled a face expressing dislike.

"There was another swarm of lantern beetles along at the quarry. The Major knows we're getting on well here." He jerked his iron grey head towards the aqueduct. "So he says we're to take a few days off, and go up river with the helicopters, spraying insecticide."

"The devil he does!"

Bill realised Major Stanton had his job to do—as he thought fit. Doubtless the Major had to report to his superior, back on Earth, and the beetles were regarded as a nuisance to be cleared away quickly. But Bill did not agree that his men, civilians on a contracted job, should be taken from their proper work.

"Was it much of a swarm, Ned?" he asked.

"As thick as any I've seen. A plague of locusts has nothing on it. They were inches thick on everything, until a big cloud of bugs coming up from the south got within a couple of miles, then the lot took off and joined them."

"I probably saw that cloud," Bill put in. The number of beetles was fantastic. "What did you say to the Major?"

"That you're the boss."

"Good. I'll see him!"

Bill got into the truck, turning it in a tight circle. There were lots of clearing up jobs, final checks, to make at the cutting and aqueduct. The large helicopters had been brought for civilian use, not military. There was still plenty of work for them and their crews, confirming the analyses with fresh soil samples, and mapping in detail the useful land which would be watered.

The military buildings were not impressive, and occupied a rise down the slope below the camp. A big communications hut, with aerials, dwarfed several military vehicles clustered near. Bill went straight to the Major's office, knocked, and was admitted by an aide. Stanton was a lean hawk of a man, though usually reasonable, Bill admitted, even if stubborn.

Stanton got up. "I hoped you'd be coming, Mr. Cartwright," he said cordially. "I'm glad the aqueduct's practically finished."

Bill smiled. "It's a very long way indeed from being finished, sir." It was not strictly true, but he had no wish to get landed with extra work by the Major. "In fact, I came to tell you we're aqueduct engineers, not beetle catchers. There are hundreds more soil samples to be collected—"

"But not so many that the helicopters can't be spared for a couple of days," Stanton put in diplomatically.

Bill saw that the stubborn element in the Major was aroused. The Major had power to commandeer any equipment or men, as he thought fit. But he had hitherto used that power scantily, if at all.

Major Stanton sat down, indicating a chair. "These lantern beetles need clearing up, you know," he pointed out. "They're a bane, a blight. Even your own men say so!"

"Sometimes," Bill admitted. "But that's Miss Wells' job, not ours."

Stanton snorted. "What has she done?" He drew in his lean cheeks. "Nothing at all! She's made no attempt at all to exterminate them—"

"Perhaps she thinks it isn't important."

The lean face grew red. "Their nuisance value alone is important. I think we should spray them in flight, rid the planet of them! They get in our clothes, our food."

"At least they don't bite or sting," Bill pointed out. He saw it was hopeless. The Major had made up his mind, and would stick to his decision.

Major Stanton got up again, irritable. "A couple of days use of the helicopters will be sufficient."

"I can't agree to letting you have them at all, Major," Bill said stiffly.

Stanton's lips grew tight. "That is a definite refusal?"

"I fear so, sir, on the grounds that our own work isn't finished and that we need the helicopters."

Major Stanton glared at him, and Bill was glad he was a civilian with certain rights, and not a junior officer. "I can get confirmation of my order from Earth, Cartwright."

"Do, if you feel you must." It would take a few days. "Meanwhile, we can get on with our survey of soil conditions. It's been a side-line and not by any means finished." Bill smiled evenly. "Please put in your report that I refused you use of the machines because we need them, sir. Our contract includes collecting soil samples."

He let himself out, aware that Stanton was muttering something very uncomplementary.

Outside, he wondered why he had been so positive. It was, perhaps, something Lindy had said a long time before. "Everything has its place, Bill," she had said. "It's not for us to start knocking pins out until we know what they hold up."

Not that this seemed to apply to the beetles, Bill thought. Perhaps, after a few days, he would climb down, let the Major have the machines. After all, the beetles were a nuisance, especially when they descended in swarms and clouds anywhere by the Sand Flat camp.

He spent the rest of the day checking the aqueduct, and was pleased with the giant trough, which would carry a vast quantity of water to the once flourishing dry land west of the river. To emphasise his point he had to send the three helicopter crews out, with soil sampling gear, but told them not to hurry. Stanton was watching when the three craft took off leisurely and drifted away into the westward sky.

Late towards evening, Ned Mace came in with a report on the concreting, and Bill sat with him in the lit hut, studying the listings. The concrete they had been able to combine was as good as any which could have been got on Earth. Bill prepared for bed with a feeling of satisfaction. True, a bomb blast from Stanton could be expected within a few days. But a soundly designed, fully satisfactory aqueduct would count a lot in counterbalancing criticism.

Night crept over the planet segment, and over its tiny seas. On the sea surface, feeding, glistened uncounted billions of lantern beetles. They swam, crowding so thickly their wing cases brushed. Their undersides glowed, filling the water to a depth of many fathoms with an eerie luminous green. Lower in the water, millions of grub-like pupae wriggled, feeding on minute plankton, other animal life, and each other.

The hemisphere of the planet was strangely silent, arid, almost devoid of vegetable life, except where each watercourse made its long, slow way to the sea. Faint weak breezes stirred over the sandstone plains, taking up no moisture from the parched rock and sand. No moon shone, and no shallow tides moved on the small seas. The planet was not plenteous with water. No fish moved in the seas, only the myriads of lantern beetles swirled and skated on the surface, and below them the multitudes of pupae swam, dense clouds amid the long weeds at the shore. At slowly shelving river mouths, beetles whirled and skated, rising and dipping. The slowly moving waters boiled and churned with the multitude of them, so that each river mouth and sea was covered with a swirling, glowing, ever-changing froth.

As night came more darkly over the hemisphere, beetles rose heavily, congregating into vast swarms that stretched for miles in the sky. Moving in vast clouds, wings almost touching, they sped away from the sea inland, seeking solid ground upon which to rest. The night was alive with vast sheets of moving green, thick layers of uncounted multitudes of flying insects.

The beetles flew fast, and moved in unison through the sky, following some age-old instinct, as sure of their course as migratory birds. Only when dawn began to lighten the sky did some begin to descend, to rest. Others, more recently risen, pressed on, their luminescence fading in the sunlight, wings glinting so that flowing sheets of silver spanned the heavens.

"Wonder if it ever rains," Ned Mace said.

Bill slapped dust from the plans on the hut office trestle table. "The river always runs, Ned. That's all we need worry about. The depth of its bed is one proof." He opened a cabinet and took down a thick folder. "Actually, we've some information. The rainfall was completed at about 0.01in. annually—"

Ned pulled up a four legged stool, sitting heavily. "That's not enough to make a puddle."

"Maybe not. But this survey doesn't go back very far, as such things count. The air is extremely dry, as we've all noticed." It was nearly noon, but quite cool. "Large parts of Earth have little or no rain, and the relative ocean area there is so much greater than on this planet. There are the Earth tropical forest areas, too, and no equivalent here."

"I suppose you're right." Ned's bleached blue eyes gazed out of the window at the slight rise, dotted with stones, arid and dry. "For my part, I'll be glad to finish and go home."

He got up, leaving, and Bill settled down to complete the factual report that was all his boss back on Earth would ever see of the aqueduct that had cost so much. He was worried about the Major's ultimatum. Major Stanton was respected, relied upon—a blasting condemnation from him could do a lot of harm to a man, even a civilian, Bill thought. Yet Bill was not prepared to let the helicopters spray lethal chemicals upon the clouds of beetles.

There was a line to the filter and pumping building by the sluice, and to Lindy's temporary but quite efficient laboratory. Bill decided to ring her. She sounded pleased to hear him.

"Any further pressure from the Major, Lindy?" he asked.

"Some, Bill." Her voice was a bit depressed. "He'll get his own way in the end. He always does."

Bill pondered, scratching his cheek. "He's determined to clear up these flying pests?"

"I'm afraid so. He thinks it's part of his job."

"I see. And what exactly do we know about the beetles—only that they exist in astonishing numbers, and seem to do no harm."

There was a pause. "They have a considerable nuisance value."

He noted the tone in her voice. "You've found out something new?"

"A little. It'll please the Major, but not you, Bill." She was obviously turning papers. "You remember the filter trouble we've had because of the animalculae life in the water? Well, the sludge level has been rising, and I've been going into it fully."

She paused. Bill felt uneasy. "Yes?" he urged.

A drawer closed. "It would be better if you came to see for yourself, Bill."

"Very well. I'll do that."

It was a bumpy ride to the filter station, but short. Lindy Wells waited at the open door. The clear river waters disappeared into a cutting under the building, and a murmur of pumps sounded inside. From here, water was piped up for all the needs of the camp.

"There's always been too much filterable material," she said, taking him inside. "We've got a coarse rotating filter, which removes most of it, and automatically dumps it in the river again, below our pumps."

They went along a raised cat-walk over the flowing water, and into a large room where the hum of rotary pumps was louder. Water emerged from a steel sluice, and passed over a saucer-shaped drum, obliquely pivoted, which rotated steadily. Bill felt astonished. As the drum rose from the flowing water, it bore a thick mass of transparent jelly.

"Millions of filterable creatures," Lindy said. She pointed to lumps of jelly slopping from the drum back into the river below the pumps. "We're dumping it back, as that's the easiest method of disposal." She paused significantly. "It's made up of beetle larvae, in a rudimentary state."

"Beetle larvae!" Bill gazed at the masses of jelly, each handful composed of billions. The mass was transparent, and that explained why the river looked so clear. "It's astonishing!"

"And another good reason why we should be rid of these pests," a voice said firmly.

Bill jerked round, and met Major Stanton's eagle eyes. Stanton was looking with distaste at the masses of jelly, continuously discharged into the river.

"These beetles are the pest of the planet," Stanton said factually. "I assume even you can see that now, Mr. Cartwright. I've radioed Earth for permission to exterminate them—to bring in more men, if needed, and extra helicopters, or other aircraft, so that we can cover the large areas required. I've asked for special spraying plant and storage tanks, and for vastly increased supplies of the most lethal insecticides. I've also reported your obstruction and my view on that matter will have weight."

There was a gleam in his eyes which Bill did not like. The sound of pumps, and the splashing of the huge rotating filter, filled the room. Condemnation from Stanton could lose a man his job. Bill nodded at Lindy.

"Let's get out of here!"

They left Major Stanton staring at the discharging jelly. Outside, Bill took Lindy's arm.

"What do you think of it all?"

Her lips grew serious. "I don't know, Bill. On the face of it, the Major's right. The beetles are a nuisance, and have no apparent good points or use. I suppose some unusual fact, such as the lack of bird life, allowed them to increase so. They've no natural enemies."

Bill nodded, but felt uneasy. There was an odd balance in nature, whereby everything had its uses, and nothing was destroyed which had a purpose. Perhaps birds had once nearly destroyed the beetles, and in doing so had destroyed themselves. That, too, could explain the lack of bird life, even if not the overwhelming comeback of the beetles.

Bill had to admit that Stanton was a man who got things done. Within the week four large helicopters had been delivered by spaceship and were being assembled. A store dump of suitable chemicals had existed on a planet in an adjoining system, and Stanton had commandeered the whole, and had a selection ferried to the camp. Looking at the great number of sealed drums, lowered from the space freighter by derrick, Bill feared that here was enough insecticide to rid the planet of its last beetle for ever.

The Major was to be seen with an aide, checking drums and aircraft, issuing instructions, looking on at tests made on groups of beetles brought back daily. Bill felt a great unease.

By the next day preparations for Stanton's all-out attack on the beetles were practically finished. Bill saw that their complete destruction would soon be an accomplished fact.

"Why worry?" Ned asked, when Bill met him by the end of the aqueduct. "We've done our job. Even if the Major upsets the balance of nature, as you put it, that's his trouble, not ours!"

Bill agreed that was one way to look at it, but shook his head. "I'm against this mass extermination." He had never felt annoyance at the lantern beetles. They seemed harmless, and did not even choose to linger by humans or food. "Feel like a trip, Ned?"

Ned Mace looked at him curiously. "For what purpose?"

"I'm not sure." North, away beyond the sandstone rise which separated the old watercourse from the new bed, the river glinted distantly. "There's nothing we need do here. I'd like to see where the beetles go."

"Go?" Ned repeated, then understanding came in his eyes. "You mean we always see them flying north, up the river, but not back again."

Bill was silent, unable to explain his unformed thoughts. Vast clouds of lantern beetles regularly moved northwards, but it was unusual to see any flying south.

"I'll get Lindy," he said, "and we'll take a helicopter. At least it'll let me get away from the Major for a bit!"

As the helicopter lifted, Bill saw that Stanton's preparations were finished. The helicopters could rise to a great height, and spray insecticide over the square miles of the beetles, waiting until they rose in masses after evening feeding at the river mouth.

Bill took the helicopter up fast, and away north. Lindy and Ned looked down on the slow, winding river. The clear sharp line of the aqueduct and cutting drifted away from view, and the brown, useful land to be watered became a mere smudge.

"There's nothing like these beetles on Earth," Bill said pensively, hands on the controls. "Their larvae come down the river and presumably those that survive emerge out at sea, and after a period reach maturity, and fly back up the river. As the larvae come down with the current, egg-laying must be far up river."

"That seems likely," Lindy agreed. "There have been so many things to do, I've not given them detailed study yet."

They listened to the swish of the blades. Bill began to look for the valley which was some hundreds of miles north of the camp.

"I've not been this far north," he said, as it began to appear as a grey-green smudge ahead.

"Nor I," Ned said, and Lindy grimaced.

It was a typical watershed, valleys running together, petering out south among the hills where the river ran. The sky was clear, except for a long, glinting strip, slowly in motion—a distant flight of beetles, wings glistening, so remote they resembled a wide vapour trail. The valley came below, the river like a ribbon between banks clothed with a low, grey plant.

They landed at a spot where brown sandstone showed through the plants. As the craft dropped, Bill saw that the ground and stems swarmed with beetles, so thick that they ran on and over each other, a great carpet stretching as far as he could see. The rotors swished to a standstill, and Lindy looked down at the ground.

"I don't feel much like hiking among this lot, Bill!"

He smiled. "Can't blame you. I want to look at the river—that's why I came."

He walked towards lower ground with Ned. The river was ahead, but narrower here, as they had come a long way up the valley. All the beetles were large, mature insects. As Bill descended the rocky ground, a cloud of them went over, very low, darkening the sky. Their wings sounded like heavy wind, and they would obviously land a few miles higher up the valley.

"It must take them a good many days to get here, from the sea," Ned pointed out. "Instinct is a wonderful thing."

Bill looked back towards the helicopter. They had walked a full mile, and there had been an almost uninterrupted carpet of beetles. It was another mile to the river.

They could only walk slowly, and after ten minutes Ned sat down abruptly on a high rock.

"Ahead is just the same, Bill," he objected. "Why go on?"

Bill paused. "I'm not sure why, Ned! Stay here if you want."

He left Ned on the rock, and descended the undulant slopes. He was half way between the rock and the river when he noticed the first stream. A tiny trickle, but in a well defined path through the sandstone, it bounced rapidly towards the river. Further on, other trickles were visible, emerging from among the low plants, joining each other, until they were substantial streams, running down to join the water below. Beetles swarmed over the plants and sandstone.

There was a heavy, mysterious silence lower down the valley. The streams were frequent, and he could easily believe that, united along all the miles of the valley, they could form the river below. The beetles were slower, like insects that had paired, deposited eggs, and lost motivation.

Down at the river bank, many streams bubbled rapidly, filling the river. There was some evidence of decaying beetles in the water. Presumably all such matter was consumed by the larvae, in their downward passage in the slow current, Bill thought. The beetles died here.

He knelt down, examining some of them nearby. They had a thin, shrivelled appearance. Their stock of food, gathered days or weeks before in the dance on the sea, was exhausted. Occasionally larger beetles came, flying low, individuals split from clouds now higher up the valley. They were fat, shining with gleaming cases over their wings. Bill squatted, watching them, wondering. One, near his feet, paused momentarily, depositing a few drops of clear liquid, then moved on, pausing again, depositing another drop, its body visibly shrinking.

For an instant Bill's tongue clove to his mouth, then he rose quickly, excitement in his eyes, and ran up the slope. At his noisy, rapid progress beetles rose ahead, clouds through which he ran, as through an insect snowstorm.

Ned got up quickly, startled. Bill pointed to the helicopter.
"We've got to get back to Sand Flat quick !"

He scarcely spoke during the flight, but sent the machine skimming at maximum speed in a direct course. When they were on the straight run for the camp, and it was visible ahead, Lindy's annoyance began to show.

"Sorry," Bill said. "But I was thinking we had all agreed on the beetle life-cycle ! They lay high up the valley, among the plants and streams. Their larvae descend in the river, taking quite a time to reach the sea. Presumably there is some

seasonal variation in numbers, which explains the increase in the larvae filtered out at the sluice. In the sea, they grow, feed on each other, and eventually emerge as a flying beetle. The beetles grow, until they are adult, and they fly up the river course, descend in the valleys, and repeat the cycle."

"Agreed long ago," Lindy said acidly.

Bill scarcely heard. "Could the method of filtering you are using be extended? Very much, I mean—for example, to treat all the water going over the new aqueduct?"

She frowned. "Probably. At least the early filtering would be possible, and that removes nine-tenths of the larvae. It would need big rotary filters, but it could be done."

"Good."

Men were around the helicopters on the field. One craft was rising slowly. Long tubes with nozzles, from which the vaporised chemicals would be sprayed, projected underneath.

Bill sent the helicopter towards the machine, swooping low over it. He circled, rising quickly, dropping again until his wheels were dangerously near the other machine's blades. Its pilot glared at him, pointing away, but Bill swooped over again, pointing earthwards.

At his sixth attempt the other realised he was determined, and both machines sank slowly, landing a few paces apart. The pilot got out, angry. Simultaneously, Major Stanton appeared at the field edge, standing in a truck that raced towards them.

Bill got out slowly. Stanton was red, and jumped from the truck.

"This means the end of your career, Cartwright! I shall demand you are removed—"

Bill's fingers closed on his arm. "Don't say any more until you've heard me out, Major!"

He almost forced Stanton back towards the helicopter, from which Lindy and Ned had emerged. There, he released him.

"I've built a good aqueduct, Major," he said.

Stanton swore. "Admittedly. But since then you've disgraced yourself!"

"An aqueduct is no use without water, Major," Bill put in hastily. "It's part of my job to see the aqueduct is useful. Let's put it that way." He silenced them with a hand. "There's no rainfall—but a river. Didn't you ever wonder how?"

"Naturally," Major Stanton said with acid irony. "But it can be investigated later. Probably moisture-storing rocks."

"Probably not," Bill disagreed. A thin scattering of straggling beetles dotted the ground. There always were a few, everywhere. "These things emerge, eat and grow at the sea. They fly up the valleys, and lay their eggs."

"So I am aware," Stanton snorted. "What has all this to do with the aqueduct?"

"Everything." Bill looked up, pointing. A vast cloud of beetles, miles wide, miles long, uncountable in multitude, was winging northwards in the distant sky. "More regular than rainclouds, Major! And driven up stream by instinct, and the need to survive! We can arrange rotary filters so that the larvae are diverted and go down to the sea, while the water we need crosses the aqueduct. By that method, we shan't reduce the number of larvae too significantly."

"Not reduce the larvae," Stanton growled. "I mean to exterminate them!"

"If you do, there'll be no river," Bill said finally. "Each beetle carries its cargo of water—just a few drops each! Multiply those drops by the number, just as the moisture droplets in a rain cloud form a river, and you have *that*!"

He pointed towards the river beyond the sandstone ridge. He saw that Lindy and Ned understood, and that astonishment was replacing the anger on Stanton's face. Bill raised a finger towards the sky.

"There is your aqueduct," he said.

The bugs were a silver streak in the sky, now. A cloud that moved steadily northwards, the length of half the sky, but slow with distance. A straggler from the bonnet of the Major's truck spread its wings and rose, heavy with its burden.

"I think you had better change your orders, Major," Bill said quietly. "And I would appreciate a full report going back to Earth soon, specially mentioning the extreme importance of this discovery!"

He smiled, watching the receding cloud of beetles. He could probably help Stanton write that report.

Evening settled over the hemisphere, and the huge clouds of beetles rose, each ponderous with its burden. Their small legs and mandibles were drawn in, their oval bodies were hollow, adapted by long selection as water vessels. Their major

strength was in their wings, devised to carry the heavy load, but their endurance was only sufficient to take them far up the valley, on this single flight. Microscopic larvae already swam in the water each held, and upon the deposited moisture being sufficient to join the first trickle that would reach the river depended the survival of the larvae. Aeons of natural selection had long ago eliminated beetles whose water carrying ability was too small.

As the planet turned, vast swarms rose, hiding the stars, driven in land by instinct. The sun of Canis Ven was already below the horizon, and Lindy halted with Bill, watching a luminous cloud of beetles sweep across the night sky.

"There'll be a lot to go in our report, Bill," she said, voice awed. "It's high time I began preparing my part of it." She furrowed her brow. "What shall I call these beetles—"

Bill smiled. The huge flight of insects was like a cloud illuminated by faint luminous green.

"I can think of a name," he suggested. "How about Aquarius Beetles—the Water Carriers."

Francis G. Rayer

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New Australian writer John Baxter presents an unusual legal problem—supposing humanity was not the rightful owner of Earth ?

EVICTION

by JOHN BAXTER

The Director's office was a good one, as director's offices go; blonde wood and royal blue carpet, Swedish glass and American lighting, French abstracts on the wall and through one wide window a view of the Scottish highlands that most Southerners would have given their arms for. A surer sign of influence was the decanter of whisky displayed in a prominent position on a side cabinet along with a set of glasses. No furtive bottle in the bottom drawer for the director of Loch Carran Research Establishment.

It was rather good whisky too, Paul Antman thought admiringly as he took another sip, though hardly worth coming all the way to Scotland to sample. This, however, was typical of the bureaucratic mind—whip a man away from court in the middle of a complex lawsuit, mutter something about "National emergency" and shove him into the latest, fastest and therefore most uncomfortable jet, fly him a thousand miles—then spend ten minutes in social amenities without a mention of the reason for all this brouhaha. Still, Paul was used to this sort of thing. Special service with the UN makes one infinitely patient. He finished his drink, put down the glass and looked across the desk at the establishment director.

"You'll pardon my bluntness, Mr. Sharp," he said, "but would you kindly tell me what this is all about?"

The other man sat down carefully. He looked worried, even harassed, and perhaps a little . . . bewildered? It shocked Paul to remember where he had seen such a look before—on the face of a prisoner in the dock. He had the look of a condemned man.

"I'm afraid you're going to find this rather hard to grasp," Sharp said eventually.

That sounded interesting. "We'll see," Paul commented casually. "Now what are the details? Why do you need a barrister up here on a research station devoted mainly to astronautics?"

"Well, I'd best start from the beginning. The fact of the matter is . . ." he paused wearily, ". . . we've contacted people from another planet."

"I know," Paul said.

The expression on Sharp's face was an odd mixture of surprise and disbelief.

"You know? How could you possibly know? This is top secret!"

Paul smiled faintly. "I may only be a lawyer, Mr. Sharp, but I've been working for the UN a number of years. A lot of that work has been highly confidential, and I'm generally considered by most people in the upper levels of the administration to be a good security risk. So not much escapes my notice, especially not things as important as alien landings on Earth."

Sharp seemed relieved. "I suppose it's a good thing, in some ways. The more I talk about this business, the more confusing it becomes. How much do you know?"

"Most of the general background, I think. A ship landed somewhere in the Australian desert three days ago. We can't find the thing anywhere, and it didn't show up on radar anywhere, but a few people remember seeing bright lights in the sky around then in that general area. On the morning of the 23rd, three of these—people? men? whatever you call them—walked out of the desert and stopped a passing motorist. They spoke good English, and asked the man to put them in touch with the government. The Australians didn't have the facilities to handle them, so they were flown to England the next day, and brought straight to Loch Carran. They're humanoid, apparently quite peaceful and harmless. They carry no weapons. And that's about all I've heard so far."

Sharp nodded. "You seem to have most of the details, though you're a bit off the beam about them being harmless."

Paul felt a slight shiver run down his neck. "This is more than a casual contact then?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Sharp replied, drumming nervously with his fingers on the desk-top. "It looks like they've been watching us for some time—months perhaps. They speak English flawlessly, and they have a good grounding in our customs. They've planned this visit for a long time, I think."

"What have they got in mind? Conquest?"

The director shook his head. "Worse than that, I'm afraid."

"Worse?" Paul frowned. "I don't see what could be worse."

"A number of things. Cultural extinction, for one; loss of personality as a race."

Paul was becoming more confused by the second. "I don't follow you," he said.

"What it amounts to," Sharp explained bleakly, "is that these people claim, with some solid evidence to back them up, that they own the Earth."

Paul looked out over the misty hills until his brain cleared. Then he turned again to Sharp.

"Did I understand you to say they claim to actually *own* the Earth? The whole planet?"

"If you can believe them, we—the whole race, I mean—are only tenants."

Paul sat still for a long time, turning the matter over in his mind.

"My first reaction would have been to say it's all quite ridiculous," he said eventually, "but you said something about evidence . . .?"

Sharp looked more depressed than ever. "I don't know, whether it comes under the legal definition of evidence," he said, "but it looks authentic enough to scare me spitless." He thumbed a button on his desk and the door of a small lift opened in one wall. "I think it might be better if you met these people and got the story directly from them. I don't want to confuse you more than necessary."

It was a long trip from the director's office to the lower catacombs where the aliens had been quartered, but it was made even longer and more irritating by the periodical ceremony of pass-showing, fingerprint-comparing, password-

giving and other sacrifices to the god Security. By the time they arrived at the quarters, Paul had lost all of the initial fear he had felt at the prospect of meeting beings from another planet. When Sharp took him aside at the door with the same worried air as any other client before a conference, it was almost funny. He felt no different than he usually did before some ordinary lawsuit in London.

"What we want you to do, Altman," Sharp said, "is to form an opinion of just how strong a legal case these people have. From what they've told us, I gather there is some sort of interplanetary judicial system that runs along approximately the same lines as our own. According to them, we *base* our system on theirs . . . but you'll hear all about that from them. What we want to know is, are they lying, and if they're telling the truth, do they have a good case. Assuming that common law is similar on Earth and among the planets, there may be a loophole."

Paul nodded, and the director opened the door.

To his surprise, Paul found it easy to adjust to the aliens. At first, the lack of expression on their long colourless faces had been disturbing, but soon he was addressing himself to the three creatures in the olive drab robes as if they were no more unusual and exotic than Earthmen from some country foreign to England. In a few minutes, he had slipped comfortably into the same role he had played in countless other similar situations. He was like a fencer, cautiously circling his adversary, sizing him up, looking for an opening to attack.

"Now, as I understand it," he said coolly, "you are claiming, on behalf of your race, ownership of this planet. Is that correct?"

The alien's voice was as quiet and cool as his own. "To a certain extent, yes. We claim certain rights to the world by virtue of prior discovery. Ships of our race discovered and landed on this world millenia ago. While this does not mean we 'own,' the planet, nevertheless it does give us certain rights."

"Assuming for a moment that your claim of having landed here before is true, is it legally possible for a race to have rights to a planet if they have never been resident there? You understand our knowledge of galactic law is limited."

"From what we have seen of your customs," the alien said, "we gather that you have property laws very similar to our

own. If a man of your race owns a portion of land, must he live there all the time to maintain his right of ownership?"

It was a good point. "But we're talking in terms of planets and races, not individuals and pieces of land. The idea of trading in worlds is incredible. I find it difficult to believe that any logical galactic legal system would allow such an arrangement."

Although he found their facial expression impossible to read, Paul thought he detected a hint of exasperation in the set of the alien's mouth. "I hope you will not be offended when I say that your race knows little of these things. Ownership of a planet is just as reasonable as ownership of a piece of land—the difference is merely one of degree. Our race deals in worlds like certain members of your race deal in land. It is as simple as that."

"But we live on this world," Paul protested. "We grew up here! Surely the right of prior occupation is more powerful than the right of discovery. When an Earthman finds a new continent, he doesn't retain the right to that continent. It belongs to the people of the world."

The contemptuous twist of the alien's mouth was unmistakable now. "Again, I'm afraid you are not in possession of all the facts," he said, slowly and distinctly, as if he were talking to a rather simple child. "Let me explain the matter from the beginning. For billions of centuries, we have been exploring the universe, mapping shipping lanes, pioneering and trading. This is our way of life, and the galaxy thanks us for doing these things. But for the ships of my race, there would be no expansion, no colonisation. In return for our work, we are granted special rights to the worlds we discover and chart. The most important of these is the right to arrange colonisation of the planets that are suitable for settlement.

"We establish colonies, either of our own race or of others, and sell transport, machinery and supplies to the settlers. Our usual arrangement is to transport a group of settlers to a new planet and set them up there, supplying them with the machinery and materials they will need to establish themselves. In return, we extract some of the more easily mined metals and minerals from the planet's crust. The colonists are given machinery and knowledge of the techniques that will enable them to mine those minerals which cannot be reached easily from the surface. The machines are semi-automatic—no hard

labour is required to operate them, and if the veins of metal are large, they can be left to excavate, refine and store the metal by themselves.

"After a certain period, we return to collect the stored metal, and supply in return the machinery and knowledge that will enable the colony to move on to a higher level of development. In most cases, this system works well, but on this planet there seems to have been a break in the progression. From our observations, it seems that a freak readjustment of your planet's orbit caused enormous changes in the climatic conditions here. Most of the world froze completely, incapacitating the machines, wrecking the mining installations and forcing the colonists to adopt a barbaric standard of living to survive. Your society is composed of descendants of those original colonists, although you have apparently lost all knowledge of your true history and situation."

Colonists—the word brought to Paul's mind a feeling of terrible impermanence, a pang of completely basic fear.

"All the details are here," the alien continued, extracting a roll of some metallic foil from a tube at his belt. "This is a copy of the original contract. I think you will find it in order."

Paul took the roll in his hand and unwound it. The sheet was covered in lines of spidery symbols, obviously a language of some kind but one with which he was totally unfamiliar. But under the words, etched into the metal, were two sets of photographs and handprints. One set belonged to a creature who could have been the twin of his opponent. There was the same expressionless face, smooth unwrinkled skin, three-fingered hand, with long four-jointed fingers. The other set was unmistakably human.

Hiding his dismay, Paul handed the sheet back. "I'm sorry. I don't understand this language at all. Can you translate it for me?"

The alien flattened the sheet out on the table and glanced quickly over it.

"There is a great deal of legal wording here," he said "so I will give you a shortened version of the contents. Briefly, a group of colonists, two thousand in number, from a planet in the region of the star you call Vega, here agree to abide by the agreement entered into below—this was the contract I outlined to you earlier—in return for periodical deliveries of certain machines, instructional material and technical assistance. This

is to be supplied every five *siv*—that would be about ten thousand of your years—and the colonists further agree to . . .”

“Ten thousand years !” Paul interrupted. “Do you mean this contract was made ten thousand years ago ?”

“Approximately, though I will have to consult my time comparison tables to find the exact period.”

“But that would mean our debt to you would be almost incalculable ! We could never hope to refine enough minerals to pay you what you claim.”

“That is a great pity. If you are unable to uphold your part of the bargain, then you must pay the penalty.”

“And if we object ?”

“Then we must use force to evacuate you from this planet and return you to your original home. We must recoup our investment in some way, and the most convenient methods of doing this would make the planet completely uninhabitable. Force-mining is a brutal form of development. It leaves a planet little more than a desert of rock and sand.”

Paul imagined the green face of earth ravaged by the mining machines and shivered. There must be a loophole here. If not, he would try to make one. If he battered hard enough at their case, perhaps it would crack somewhere.

“But you still haven’t given any proof. The document you showed me could be forged. You have no witnesses, and we have no history of any agreement with your race. What is there to prove you have been here before ? You claim all evidence was destroyed. It seems more likely to me that none ever existed.”

“You are a very stubborn man,” the alien said, after a pause. “And also, I think, a very stupid one. We can offer proof, if you insist. On our way down through your atmosphere, we picked up radiation traces from certain mechanisms which make up part of our mining machines. The radiation was very weak, but we can still locate the point from which it is coming. Would the remains of a mining machine constitute proof ?”

Paul felt a cold sweat break out all over his body. He nodded, without hope.

Two days later, he had the evidence in front of him. It was only an untidy pile of corroded metal, stone and crumbling ceramic. Most people would have called it rubbish, but to Paul Antman it represented the gravestone of the world. The

metal couldn't have been planted there by the aliens—it was too obviously old, and the observers who had watched every stage of the excavation swore that it had been completely buried in a shelf of solid rock that went back to the ice age. The location in which it had been found—halfway up the slope of India's most precipitous mountain—proved that this was the wreck of no earthly machine. The only possible explanation was that the aliens were telling the truth.

Again, Paul went over the remains, looking for some clue, some indication that might help his case. He picked up a splinter of rock that had been caught in the scrambled circuits of the machine. It crumbled in his fingers. He took another piece. It too crumbled like rotten wood. Touching a porcelain insulator, he felt it give slightly under his fingers like damp sand. The metal was still sound, but the stone and ceramic were surprisingly weak. An idea stirred in his mind, then took stronger hold. There were inconsistencies in the logic of it, but at least it explained some of the curious behaviour of the aliens. The chances against Paul being right were huge, but it was worth a try. Picking up some slivers of stone and porcelain on a sheet of paper, he went into the lab next door and dumped them on to a bench in front of a startled chemist.

"How old would you say this stuff was?"

The chemist looked puzzled. "Goodness knows. I'm no geologist. I can probably get them to date it down at the nuclear physics lab. They seem to be able to calculate the age of almost anything by irradiation and that sort of thing."

"How long will it take? This is urgent."

"Two hours maybe. We get top priority here."

For ninety minutes, Paul sat at his desk, sweating. He kept telling himself it was just a guess, the merest suggestion of a possibility. But it certainly added up. If only the figures were right. When the chemist returned, he snatched the paper out of his hand.

"Well? What's the date? How old is it?"

Startled, the man pointed at the sheet of scribbled figures in Paul's hand.

"It's all there. They didn't have time to do a dead accurate job, but they estimate it as somewhere between twenty and twenty five thousand years."

Paul sat down heavily, more in surprise than relief. It had worked. Against all the odds and all the indications, it had

worked. He almost ran into the director's office and tossed the sheet of paper on to his desk. Sharp looked at it uncomprehendingly.

"What's this?" he asked.

"The answer."

"To what?"

"Our problem. Those are radiation dating figures on pieces of stone and ceramic from the stuff we dug up the other day."

Sharp looked even more baffled. "I don't follow you. What bearing . . ."

"According to those figures," Paul explained, "that wrecked machine has been there for at least twenty thousand years."

"But that's impossible. It would mean . . ."

"That the aliens were lying. That wreck has been there at least twice as long as they claim."

"But what difference does it make? Once we concede that they've been here, no matter how long ago, we have to agree automatically that their claim is valid. After all, they were here first—therefore, they probably have a legal right to exploit the planet."

"No." Paul shook his head vehemently. "They entered into a contract with us that cancelled all their rights. In effect, they handed the planet over to us. In return we supplied minerals, and on their side, in addition to letting us occupy the world, they supplied us with machinery and assistance. For this to continue as a valid contract, both sides would have to keep up their side of the bargain. But the aliens haven't. Ten thousand years ago, they were supposed to deliver quantities of machinery, technical data and so on. They didn't, otherwise they would have mentioned it. The wreck they showed us is almost completely rotted away. If there were more recent remains, wouldn't they have shown us those? What I think happened is this; they came back here, on time, ten thousand years ago and found the earth in a state of barbarism. There was no metal for them to pick up, and in those days it would have been a pretty miserable place to live for very long. To make things worse, we're right out on the edge of the galaxy here, so transport costs must have made us a bad prospect even under ideal conditions. So if they were good businessmen, and these people obviously are, they wrote it off as a bad bargain and went home, taking their machinery with them. Now obviously they have discovered we're back on our feet again,

and they want to recover their loss. But the contract is void now—they invalidated it. They have no case at all. In fact, if anybody is wronged, it's us. We could sue!"

It took only a few moment to convince Sharp, and even less time to convince the administration that Paul was right. Within an hour of his discovery, a special session of the International Court was announced and arrangements made to convene it as soon as possible. The whole world and as many outworld observers who cared to watch would have a chance to see the whole plot exposed. In the few days he had, Paul worked furiously at preparing his case, but he found it difficult to concentrate. His mind was busy with a larger problem. He was an honest man, and he always charged honest fees. A labourer paid five pounds, a doctor fifty, a judge five hundred. What, he wondered dizzily, could he charge to represent a planet?

John Baxter

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Shrute was a strange place—in fact, no galactic empire had ever conquered it—but it wasn't for the want of trying.

BOTTOMLESS PIT

by PHILIP E. HIGH

They found the first one orbiting steadily—if you could call it that—and still giving its call sign long before the sun system was visible on their instruments.

They probed it carefully and, finding it negative, pulled it gingerly in for examination. They were not happy about it. Any task force is alert, but this one, being illegal, was downright jumpy. Fortunately, however, the device proved inwardly and outwardly innocuous. It was several hours later that one of the more discerning of the specialists began to draw unpleasant implications from the device.

“Kreth satellite.” Kapman folded his hands on his belly and looked profound. “They used these things as markers once, spacebuoys, beaming a warning signal to keep intruders out. That was before they became isolationist and respectable, of course.”

Prett, the Encyc, frowned. “That makes it several centuries old.”

“Too true and the damn thing is still functioning perfectly. Just how they could get a device as small as this to orbit an entire sun system at such a distance is completely beyond me.”

“There are a lot of things,” said Prett, softly, “the Kreth could do that we couldn't—we found that out a couple of centuries ago when we tried to buck them.”

Kapman frowned, remembering the war memorial in his home town and abruptly changed the subject. "Can you translate the inscription?"

"Not precisely but I can give you a broad outline. Let's see—*Dedicated to the glorious liberation*—they were always a flowery lot—*of the Shrule Sun System*." Prett paused, his face troubled. "*To whom it may concern—all planetary rights contained within these orbiting satellites pertain to the dominions, rights and possessions of the Imperial Empire of the Kreth Peoples*."

"Was it beaming that message too?"

"Yes it was."

Kapman glowered and said: "Date?" angrily.

"Ah, now." Prett pulled the lobe of his right ear, thoughtfully.

"That's a little tricky. Let's see, that little sworl with two dots—they work a curious time system, you know—hum, say five hundred years. Give it some licence, I could be fifty years out either way."

"Five hundred years old." Kapman pulled at his chin, scowling. "The Kreth never took Shrule—God, we're certain of that, they're touchy enough about their space rights. If they controlled this we would have been turned back by now—turned back or blown back."

"There's a story—" began Prett.

"A myth." Kapman cut him short, rudely. "God, Prett, don't tell me you actually entertain old wives tales like that. Obviously, the Kreth found Shrule uneconomic and wisely pulled out. Again, the pickings were probably not so good five hundred years ago, not to mention the fact that the place is virtually a swamp, its eighty three per cent ocean."

Twenty minutes later they pulled in another satellite. This one was less poetic. It said, simply: *Kreth Navigational Warning. Vessels entering this area do so at their own risk.*

The device had been placed in orbit approximately twenty five years *after* the 'glorious liberation.'

"The Kreth," said Prett, carefully, "called Shrule *Kafnursa* which means—"

"Never mind what it means." Kapman was suddenly menacing. "All that stuff is pure legend and, even if it contained one grain of truth, which it doesn't, the circumstances here are completely different. Presumably the Kreth went in to conquer and occupy, our objective is—er—less comprehensive."

"They wanted to take and hold." Prett's long thin face was suddenly bitter. "We only want to rob the bank."

Kapman smiled faintly, quite untroubled by the accusation. "That's neatly put, old man, very neatly put. It won't go down very well in the propaganda section but, bluntly, we're bank robbers . . ."

Below decks the Battle Coach dragged his pointer raspingly across a wall map. "You will note that all habitable planets within this system are E-type with a slightly higher oxygen atmosphere than our own. The atmosphere, however, lacks argon, and has in its place a gas which we call suprozine. This atmospheric phenomena appears to be unique to the Shrule worlds and, although extraordinarily difficult to analyse, careful tests have proved it quite harmless. Men have breathed the Shrule atmosphere under test conditions for long periods with no ill effects whatever."

He paused and cleared his throat. He was an elderly, bitter-eyed man with a harsh monotonous voice and a face which looked as if it had been carved from brown wood.

"Our objective is the administrative planet, that is, Shrule itself—here." He tapped the pointer on the map then touched a switch. "Let's have a closer look, shall we?" He waited while the map changed. "Ah, here we are." He raised the pointer again. "This is Shrule itself from which this system gets its name—note the unusual physical features. A mountain range stretching almost from pole to pole and nearly girdling the planet while, apart from a few islands, the rest of the planet is ocean, river or swamp land. Concentrate please, on the mountain range, for to us they represent an operational beach head. In some places they are two hundred miles wide and here—map reference six stroke nine—is a plateau, four hundred miles in length and an average width of a hundred and fifty miles. Leading downwards from this plateau is a natural pass to the lowlands, here—this is the area we intend to occupy."

"As you may have noticed, this section of the lowlands is, geographically speaking, a narrow 'bay' surrounded on three sides by mountains and consequently easy to defend."

He paused and tapped his pointer against his calf. "Gentlemen, let there be no mistake, we are not here to take a planet or subjugate a race. We are here to take or hold a strip of

territory for no more than a few weeks. We want that territory as far as possible with all its existing installations *intact*. The Shrulë are not a gregarious race, their cultural centres are, therefore, few and widely dispersed. Here, however, in the area we propose to occupy, is a concentration of a great deal of the Shrulë's technical, experimental and industrial strength."

He paused and glowered at them. "A large number of aliens in this area are, therefore, scientists and top flight technicians. The penalties for indiscriminate killing, particularly of prisoners, will be severe. The armed forces will, therefore, confine themselves *only* to the crushing of opposition—"

Grayson, the soldier, listening with the trained half of his mind and weighing the pros and cons with the other, sighed inwardly. So it had come, he supposed it had to come sooner or later. Training, sabre rattling, exercise, training until one day they threw the book at you. This little exercise wasn't an exercise although it started the same way; it ended up with a nasty little label on which was printed: 'Armed Aggression.'

He had been listening to propaganda for years but he had no illusions. Gaynstor, his home system, was an outlaw about to 'hold up' an inoffensive alien at the point of gun or, more aptly, a task force so large it was almost unwieldy. It was not a case of 'your money or your life,' it was 'your technical know-how or else.'

Grayson thought sourly that the pudding basin was different but the ingredients very much the same. You had a nice little colony far out on the Rim which finally grew to maturity and then, somehow, up popped the demon—a strutting, gesticulating little father-figure tottering on the brink of dementia praecox. He told you that you were being (A) exploited (B) neglected and (C) regimented by the gigantic human empire of which you were a part.

In no time at all, it seemed, you were a breakaway system, a splinter group, with the uncomfortable feeling that you were alone in the darkness at the absolute limit of human expansion.

The father-figure had thought of this too and was fully alive to the fact that an authoritarian government must, to survive for long, be *opposed* to something, so he invented the bogey of an avenging and punitive Imperial fleet. This inspired warning got him in deeper but he was an astute man. Yes, the I.F. could wipe Gaynstor's fleet off its coat like a chalk mark but not, repeat, *not* if Gaynstor could get a jump ahead in technology.

The rest was simple. The Shrule were gentle, inoffensive, if slightly repulsive aliens, but their technology—it was known they had matter-transmitters, the geosertic star-drive, reactor-mechanisms (call them perpetual-motion machines) which couldn't but did drive vehicles and furnish power. They also had a little item called a self-constructing unit which obligingly re-arranged itself into the precise unit you desired for a particular purpose without skilled assistance.

The Shrule were also conveniently, or unfortunately—according to the point—close to a splinter system called Gaynstor.

In the operational section, Prett puffed nervously at a cigarette. "Did you ever hear of a race called the Durentha?"

Kapman scowled. "No—who are they?"

"Were," corrected Prett. "The Durentha were a race of invaders who swept through the galaxy long before man discovered the wheel. You may recall that our first expedition to Ganymede centuries ago revealed certain records and artifacts—"

"Ah, yes, I seem to remember now." Kapman was still scowling. "What about it?"

"According to star maps and translated records, the Durentha once tried to take Shrule, but, like the Kreth, they never claimed it."

"Now watch it, Prett, watch it." Kapman's voice was harsh.

"Very well." Prett shrugged. "Too many commanders in history have gone into a campaign with their eyes closed to small but vital facts. Never mind, you don't want to know about it."

"Now look." Kapman was keeping his temper with an obvious effort. "We've checked this planet, for six years we've had the place crawling with micro-robotic spy-eyes disguised as native insects. We *know* what goes on, These people are not *fighters*, they've only a handful of weapons, no armed forces and no military tradition whatever.

"Their technical superiority still makes us look like savages. Hell, when they expanded and took over the nearest unoccupied sun system they used one small spaceship to set up equipment, *one*, mark you. The rest of the job was done with matter-transmitters. You chew on that, my friend, matter-transmitters carrying several million living creatures, not to mention

all their equipment, across a gulf of five and a half light years. To draw a technical comparison we're still *rowing* our damn ships across space and taking ten times as long to do it."

"All right, you play bogey man." Kapman never lost his temper for long. "Tell you what, I'll lay you a hundred to one we have this job cleaned up in six weeks."

Prett grinned with a kind of weary despair and turned away. "Let's hope we're still alive to collect."

Kapman looked at his back and sighed. Encycs were all the same, weren't they? Pessimists. Perhaps it was because their minds were packed so full of battles, campaigns and defeats that they became chronically depressed. Prett was a good Encyc, he could remember and expound in detail on every military campaign and battle in all history right back to some antique Terran warrior called Alexander the Great, not to mention several allied subjects. It was amazing the amount of knowledge science had learned to compress into the human mind. Of course, a machine would remember even more but a machine wasn't selective, not in the same way and it took too long. A machine howled for more relevant data, a machine kicked out too many parallel situations at once and in action one just hadn't the *time*. The human mind, however, grasped *implications* which a machine could never do and gave the information 'spot on' without frantic demands for fresh data.

Kapman looked at the other's back again and wondered what it was like to be an Encyc—a walking tactical encyclopaedia.

The landing on the plateau was a perfect demonstration of planned co-ordination and passed without incident. Before the final wave of transports had landed, the first wave had already disgorged a rolling mass of vehicles and supplies. These were already rumbling down the pass under a tight umbrella of radio controlled 'eyes' and several squadrons of two-man grav-floats.

From the lowlands came no opposition and apparently no reaction.

Prett was not even watching. He was staring moodily in the opposite direction, his eyes troubled. Presently he crossed the room and snapped a screen switch.

"What now? Kapman sounded irritable and on edge.

"I noticed something on the upper plateau as we came down." Prett made magnification adjustments. "Got it—what do you make of that?"

Kapman flushed slightly, opened his mouth but never began a sentence.

On the secondary plateau, two thousand feet above them was a skeleton—the skeleton was seven thousand feet long and might once have been an interstellar vessel. The outer plates were eaten away with rust, compartments and decks had fallen in on themselves. Only the bare sagging structure remained, a stress-outline of circular and interlinking girders like the blackened rib-cage of a long dead animal.

"Kreth?" Kapman was subdued now and slightly apprehensive.

"I'm not sure." Prett was without triumph. "I don't think so, the Kreth are sectional constructors."

"It crashed, perhaps." Kapman was clutching at straws and knew it.

"So very precisely?" Prett turned away.

Kapman found he was sweating slightly and in no mood for further dispute. Damn the man, damn—he was however, unable to force facts from his mind. If the hulk wasn't Kreth, it must be Durentha which meant . . .

Kapman felt a coldness creep slowly up his back. The Durentha had tried, the Kreth—surely there was no truth in all those tales? Yet the Kreth called Shrule *Kafnursa* which meant—the Bottomless Pit.

Grayson, squatting on the floor of a troop carrier, dragged tiredly at a cigarette. He supposed, any time now, there would be action. He did not share the optimistic view of the battle coach who had told them that the resistance, if any, would be small and badly co-ordinated. In any case a race did not have to fight to win a battle, there might the equivalent of a scorched-earth policy.

The vehicle rounded a bend and he was able to look down on the lowlands. He was surprised to find that, from above, the terrain looked like normal countryside. A vast area of green, divided and sub-divided by rivers and streams. Here and there were patches of colour which might have been flowering fields. On the far horizon water glimmered like a girdle of silver.

Nowhere could he see any sign of civilisation.

The truck stopped abruptly and, far ahead, crimson lightning stabbed at the sky. The slap of projectors came back to him, dully, like the sound of stones dropped into a deep well.

After about ten minutes they began to move again and someone enquired of a cynical-looking M.P. what all the shooting was about.

"Trigger happy." The M.P. spat his contempt. "Something flies by, someone pulls a trigger, it's as simple as that. I suppose it's natural, a savage would let fly at a tractor. This thing was dropping seeds—see?" He opened his hand displaying some brown shrivelled objects like ancient grains of corn.

"Could you spare one?" Grayson was not quite sure why he made the request but he had the curious feeling that the seeds were in some way significant.

"Why not? A dispatch is taking about fifty back to base for examination." He handed one up. "Don't try and smuggle that back, boy, customs will have your head on a platter for considering it."

Grayson's nearest companion watched him pocket the seed a little dubiously. "What do you think that is—some sort of secret weapon?" He was a thin, sardonic-faced man called Willowby.

Grayson shrugged. "That and common curiosity."

"Curiosity killed the cat, I understand." Willowby made the cliché sound ominous.

"So I've heard." Grayson took the seed out of his pocket and looked at it thoughtfully. "As this is a water planet, I presume we need water."

"I grew some cress on a piece of wet flannel when I was a kid," said Willowby with faint pride. "I've no flannel, but—" He laid a piece of cleaning waste on the floor of the truck and damped it from his compressor bottle. "Care to try?"

"Why not?" Grayson laid the seed on the damp waste.

"You don't expect it to grow in front of your eyes, do you?" Other soldiers in the carrier were looking at them as if doubtful of their sanity.

Grayson shrugged. "No harm in trying. I've read that Terran bamboo grows four to six inches in a single night."

"At the rate we're advancing," said Willowby sourly, "we needn't worry. If this seed turns out to be an apple tree, we'll not only be able to sleep under the branches but eat the fruit

as well." He scowled ahead. "Someone should have put up a 'No Parking' sign."

Grayson was still watching the seed. Was it swelling? Was it quite so shrivelled as—?

He never finished the mental question.

The seed split from end to end and thrust white, almost transparent tendrils into the damp waste.

Willowby said: "Hell, just watch it grow."

"Put some more water on it," advised someone.

"Certainly." Willowby did so and added an obscene word.

The thing responded with terrifying swiftness, thrusting up a brown stem which began to sprout minute but clearly visible curved thorns before it was an inch in height.

When it was six inches tall, it curled over forming a loop, then rose again and formed another.

"Chuck it out," said someone a little nervously.

"Give it time and it will chuck us out," said someone else.

"It will stop when it has absorbed all the water." Willowby sounded calm and very sure of himself.

They waited.

After five more loops, growth slowly ceased but the entire plant was covered in curved, wickedly spiked thorns.

Willowby extended the barrel of his projector, lifted the growth from the floor and tossed it from the carrier. He looked at Grayson meaningly. "I've gone right off horticulture—are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

An hour later their section of the column, after much stopping and starting, reached the lowlands.

No one said anything, the reason for their slow progress was all too plain.

The rest of the column stretched ahead of them over open marshy ground bisected with dykes and wide shallow rivers. It curled away into the distance for about two miles and stopped. It was equally clear why it had stopped.

The loops of the growth were already forty feet tall and growing visibly. Through radar-binoculars the savagely curved thorns on the foot-thick loops of the planet were six to ten inches in length. Many of the loops were intertwined with others forming an impenetrable barrier reaching back to the protruding mountains and completely hemming them in.

It was clear from the constant flashes of pink light that the lead vehicles were trying desperately to blast their way through

the barrier but the rate of growth and the peculiarities of the plant defeated them. Fragments of plant, even slivers of thorn, tossed or blasted aside by concentrated fire, instantly took root and began to grow.

Even as they watched, six heavy vehicles which had blasted their way some eighty feet through the barrier were forced to pull out hastily as new growth sprang up behind them.

A mass assault by grav-floats made an impressively blackened crater which began to sprout plant again almost before the smoke had drifted away.

"Barbed wire entanglement — Shrute version," said Willowby in a bitter voice. "We also present a beautiful target for an alien who might be inclined to knock out an invader with a single punch."

"Cheer me up," said Grayson sourly. "I feel just as exposed as you."

"What do you think they'll do?"

Grayson shrugged. "It's a pressure problem. If we pull back and admit defeat the regime will collapse, which cannot be permitted. We shall, therefore, try and jump it."

He was right. Within three days half the force was over with the grav-floats running a constant shuttle service over a barrier sixty feet high and over a mile wide.

The jump was not made without sacrifice, behind them on the wrong side of the barrier, lay all the transports and all the heavy armour. The invaders, apart from a very few light vehicles, were back to fighting the hard way.

Beyond the entanglement the marshy land seemed to stretch away for an infinite distance into nothingness. It was not unbeautiful, it was dappled here and there with huge scarlet and cream blossoms faintly resembling water lilies. There were knee high plants bearing a multitude of bright blue berries but, to the invading troops, all of it was hell.

Grayson, trudging grimly forward, knew that the scene had occurred uncountable times in all the ages of history. The cursing mud-caked troops, the protesting squelch of boots sinking ankle deep in mud, the fatigue, the hopelessness, the obscenity. The only difference was, of course, that they had never *seen* the enemy, yet all of them realised he was calmly dictating tactics. The opening battle had already been fought and they, the troops, had lost it.

They trudged on. The nearest known alien cultural centre was an impossible thirty miles away but the grav-floats had

been unable to detect it or, for that matter, any sign of life whatever.

On the second day of the march, fog came swirling up from the ground like smoke and completely enveloped them. It was a peculiar fog which deadened sound, distorted communication and fouled up radar contact completely.

Slowly the various commands lost contact with their units, vehicles became separated from men and men from vehicles and, finally men became separated from men.

Above the fog a pilot of a grav-float rubbed his eyes angrily and squinted at his instrument panel. The faces of the dials shouldn't smear up like that, they were specially—they were smeared up, weren't they? His eyes had been sore lately and he had been feeling a little sick. Strange about the pain in his nose, too—the dials he couldn't see them.

The sound of the grav-float hitting the ground at full power reached the column dully like the slam of a heavy door. The ground shook, briefly the mist lit to a dull pink, then, silence.

Grayson never discovered how he got lost. It seemed that one minute he was talking to Willowby and the next he was walking alone. He shouted until he was hoarse but no one answered. He stood still, straining his ears but all around was silence.

Carefully he sat down on the wet ground and fought off wave after wave of hysteria. The fog and the loneliness were constricting and claustrophobic but somehow he retained his sanity by sheer dogged will power.

'I am not going to give way. I am a man, not a frightened child. I am alone but still alive, this is only thick fog—'

After ten minutes he rose to his feet almost calm and determined to keep a grip on his sanity. My nose hurts, he thought. Feels as if I had a growth in each nostril but it's too damn painful to touch. Funny stretching sort of feeling behind the ears, too.

Twenty minutes later he tripped over a body. Visibility was about five feet and he was able to distinguish details. The man lay in a shallow stream, his head and shoulders beneath the water and only the lower half of his body on the sloping bank.

Grayson pulled him out almost fearfully but it was not Willowby nor any of the men he knew. The man's hand still

clutched a side arm and quite obviously he had committed suicide. The charred body suggested that the man had put the weapon to his chest and squeezed the firing stud.

Grayson laid out the body as best as he could and trudged on. Another casualty and they'd never *seen* an alien. Yet, without apparent effort, or any direct display of force, they were chopping an army of quarter of a million men into little pieces.

He frowned, trying to remember what the Shrule looked like. They were small? Yes, delicately boned, amphibious—remembered that from the briefing—large, pathetic-looking brown eyes, like a dog, spaniels, perhaps—funny he couldn't remember the colour, dexterous webbed fingers. Now that was damn funny, why was his left shoulder stuck in the wet ground, he was still moving his feet, still walking, he thought—where and why? God, he was so tired . . .

He regained consciousness with a kind of detached disbelief as if he were standing aside from himself and doubting the functions of his own body.

His was lying full length on what looked like a rough litter but felt luxuriously comfortable. The litter was contained in brightly lit transparent cubicles some twelve feet in length and six feet in height. Beyond the transparent walls, was water.

'Sort of submarine hospital ward,' he thought, without wonder. 'I've been picked up and taken prisoner.'

He tried to move and found that his arms and legs were encased in a brownish semi-transparent substance vaguely resembling a resinous gum. Several parts of his body, including the back of his head and his nose, had received similar attention.

It was then that the 'nurse' appeared from behind him and he knew that he had colour all wrong. She was silvery, with a pelt like a seal and moved with extraordinary grace. The face was almost human with large expressive eyes and she smiled at him briefly as she came towards him, displaying small beautifully white teeth.

She bent over his resin-encased feet and he studied her covertly. There was no mistaking her sex—but of course, the Shrule were mammals, weren't they? She was tiny, perhaps, four feet nine or ten, strangely slender and in some inexplicable way, gentle. There were long white slits just behind the small but quite human ears which reached almost to her shoulders. He presumed they were gills.

He was shocked and not a little horrified to discover that he found her extraordinarily attractive.

She came close to him and there was something in her bright intelligent eyes which seemed in some curious way to recognise and respond to his feelings.

She laid a small metal object about the size of an egg by his head and passed beyond his range of vision.

He heard the hiss of what must be an airlock and a few seconds later he saw her swim agilely past the transparent walls of his cubicle.

He became aware that the egg-like object was humming in a peculiarly alternating way which made him drowsy.

Conditioning? Indoctrination? He tried to fight sleep but the persistent murmur was too strong for him. It seemed to be saying: "Listen—listen—" He slept.

When he awoke, the 'nurse' was lifting the 'egg' from near his head. "A linguistic hypno-instructor," she said. "You can understand me?"

"I can understand you." The soft, rippling words felt thick, woolly and unreal in his throat.

"Excellent. The doctor will be here soon." She smiled. "You will be pleased to hear that three-quarters of your force were saved."

"Saved—you mean taken prisoner, don't you?"

"There are no prisoners, only patients." She shook her head slowly. "Such sadness for the rest, hundreds panicked and tried to get away. Ships took off with too few men to run them and many crashed with great explosions."

He felt cold and changed the subject abruptly. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Let me see." Her eyes clouded with thought. "I must work this out by your standards—yes—nearly six months."

"Six months!" He was shaken.

"Do not be alarmed. It saved you much pain. Ah, here is the doctor."

The Shrute doctor was aggressively male. He was broad shouldered, swift moving and the muscles rippled visibly beneath the thick silvery pelt.

Grayson had expected coldness and possibly some rough words but the creature was charm itself.

"Ah, now, Greesoon, welcome to Shrute. You will find that you are in for some shocks but long experience has taught us that shock treatment is the best in the long run. Certain

mental changes have occurred during your period of unconsciousness rendering you less liable to hysteria." He paused and looked at Grayson thoughtfully. "I perceive a mutual attraction between yourself and my nurse, Slawnie. It is all for the good, there is a woeful disbalance at [the moment, we poor males are outnumbered ten to one. I will arrange a permanent union for you both as soon as you are well."

Grayson stared at him. The creature had dignity of bearing, a high intelligent forehead, bright alert eyes. He didn't *look* mad and yet he was suggesting . . .

"Naturally it is all very confusing, but you will soon understand." The Shrule doctor bent over him, holding a small torch-like instrument. "Extend your arm, please."

Grayson did so and the small instrument began to hiss softly. Slowly, the gum-like substance in which his hand and arm were encased began to grow less and finally disappeared altogether.

Grayson opened his mouth to speak but no sound came out. He tried to scream but the nerves did not respond.

The fingers of his exposed hand were webbed.

He closed his eyes, fought down hysteria and looked again. His forearm was no longer white but silver—a silver fur.

Dully he was aware that they had withdrawn from him and were watching from behind him but he did not care. He explored his body desperately and with incredulous disbelief, downwards almost to his shoulder blades. Inside his nostrils were minute flaps which he could open and close at will—God, he wasn't *human* any more.

"You did this to me." He was too numb from shock to make the sentence sound accusing. "Why? I was only one man, only one soldier—" He stopped, helplessly.

They came and stood by his bed. "No." The creature who was a doctor leaned forward slightly. "No, we did not do it. What happened to you, has happened to all those who survived." He paused. "Listen to me carefully. Listen and understand. This planet is unique in the known universe because its chief characteristic is biological conversion. In short it adapts intruder-life to its own pattern. We did not do it, the environment of this planet is responsible."

He looked at Grayson thoughtfully as if wishing to assure himself that the other understood. "No, it is not subtle differences in the atmosphere alone, there are countless other

factors, biological factors such as air- and water-borne bacteria subtleties in solar and natural radioactives. All these affect the alien body in different ways bringing rapid and, as you have observed, often frightening physical changes. Briefly, my friend, this planet had adapted you, to survive in this environment."

He paused again and nodded as if to himself. "Oh, yes, we use it, our techniques are almost as old as time. We hold the invader at arms length just long enough to let nature do her work and the battle is won. First, there were the Azeezi—long before your race left the cave—then the Durentha the Kreth and finally humanity."

He was silent as if knowing that the other was digesting the information.

Grayson was grateful for the pause. He was shocked not only by the obvious truth of the information but by the fact that he was *accepting* it. He knew he should be alarmed, horrified, even repelled by the situation but now he knew he was calm, almost pleased. Hadn't the doctor said something about psychological changes? Again, he wasn't unique, others too. Willowby, the tough M.P., all of them were—God, he was a Shrule now, wasn't he?

He looked at the doctor. "Is this why they call Shrule the Bottomless Pit?"

The doctor smiled faintly slightly. "So I have been told, alas, however, it is only a myth. Every time we're invaded we face over-population problems. The influx of the Kreth legions forced us to expand to the nearest uninhabited system where we created conditions exactly similar to those existing here." He paused and gave a very human sigh. "The Kreth were a wise race, they foresaw the implications and acted accordingly. Humanity, I fear, is less wise."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, my friend, that they will try again and our population problems will increase with each attempt. There are no more sun systems—unoccupied ones that is—capable of supporting life within two hundred light years. I am very much afraid that, sooner or later, we shall have to start taking over the Human stellar empire."

Grayson thought about it. "Yes—yes, I share your opinion—I'm very much afraid we shall . . ."

It was just a series of letters between a writer
and an Editor . . .

Too Good To Be True

By WALTER GILLINGS

Mr. Ustibaz Zabitsu,
Box No. 97441,
Grand Central Station,
New York City, 17.

Dear Mr. Zabitsu :

Thank you for submitting *The Secret of the Crater*, which I have to return with regrets.

In the event of its proving unacceptable, you wanted me to give you some indication where it fails to measure up. I will try to do so.

Like the two earlier pieces you sent us, it is written in a style which we find strangely fascinating though it hardly suits our magazine. You have a nice sense of descriptive and the atmosphere is quite real. That much we can say in your favour.

Overwhelmingly against them is the fact that your manuscripts are almost entirely lacking in story value. Your characters are too passive—they do not become involved in anything more than a series of incidents which, though interesting, are not arresting enough to grip the reader's

attention since they do not arise out of any urgent or vital problem. In short, your stories have no *conflict*.

I hope that you may be able to remedy this fault and let us see some more of your work, because your writing certainly shows promise. But, if I may say so, you still have something to learn about storytelling.

Yours very truly,
TIMOTHY WILTON,
Editor, *Superscience Stories*.

P.S.—We are overlooking the peculiar mis-spellings which occur so frequently in your MSS., for which we cannot account. And where on earth did you get that typewriter?
—T.W.

Mr. Timothy Willton,
Editor, *Superscience Stories*,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Willton,

Thank you for your comments on my stories, but I am afraid I can not agree with them. If you find the incidence you refer to interesting, why not your readers? If my writing is so fascinating, why is it not worth publishing in your magazine?

It is consoling that you should find my descriptions of the Lunar atmosphere believable. For the same reason, my characters should also seem authentic to your readers even if, as you suggest, they are not active enough. But to produce the results which they did in the course of two Lunar days surely proves them an energetic pair?

Hole generations of archeologists had searched in vain for those artifacts before they were found by diligent application to the problems involved. These might seem to have been urgent or vital, but their discovery was a great achievement for the two young Lunar scientists. Surely they would be of some interest to your many readers who look forward to the day when Earthmen will make similar finds on remote planetes with lost civilisations?

I do not know what you mean when you say that my narratives have no conflict. Can you please explain further, because I am anxious to correct my faults and produce tales that you will find acceptable. It may be that the spelling in my writings is not always accurate, but is it not the duty of an editor or his assistant to correct such errors

wear necessary? I can ownly upologise four the mistakes and regret the piculiarities of the tieping masheen I am oblised to employ. Meanwile I am sending another story witch I trussed will bee satisfactory to you.

Yours very earnestly,

USTIBAZ ZABITSU.

P.S.—As I pointed out before, if you do publish my work you may ooze another name if you prefur, since my own is sew unauthordocks.—U.Z.

Mr. Ustibaz Zabitsu,
Box No. 97441,
Grand Central Station,
New York City, 17.

Dear Mr. Zabitsu :

I regret that *The Buried Machine* (corrected spelling) is no more suitable for our magazine than your previous offerings—for the same reasons that I explained in my last letter.

Again we have two Lunar archeologists following their everyday occupations and unearthing a relic of an ancient civilisation, to the satisfaction of themselves and their mentors—but it is hardly enough to satisfy our readers. There are problems, certainly, which your hero and his buddy contrive to overcome; but these are all purely technical and professional, and in the end it is just another feather in their caps and a fresh acquisition for the Lunar Museum. Forgive us but—so what?

If you study our magazine carefully you will see that we require a good deal more in a story than a mere recital of daily activities, however well narrated. That these humdrum events take place on the Moon does not make your story science fiction of the sort we expect of our writers, in which the story is as important as the setting.

Every story must pose a problem or some intriguing situation and tell, entertainingly and plausibly, how the characters react to it. The more obstacles encountered, the more suspense may be drawn from the conflict—their efforts to overcome the problem or get themselves out of the tricky situation.

This is the basic, and we are surprised that you do not appreciate it. But the situation you describe does not lend itself to such treatment—there is no scope for violent or

intensive action in the excavatory activities of your young scientists. If their lives, or even their jobs, depended on their success there might be something in it; but the convincing atmosphere and descriptive which are again present in your story are wasted without a stronger plot.

Incidentally, you seem to be rather short on ideas—or are you so preoccupied with Lunar archeology that you cannot try something else? At least you might think a bit more about your lost civilisation which could produce machines such as this. It might offer some rather more eventful situations than your two dogged diggers seem to get themselves into. Or if only one of them was a girl, it might lead somewhere.

But keep trying—you've got some of the know-how, and we want to recruit new writers. Our nursing so many, I might add, leaves us little time to go through their MSS., correcting such consistently odd spelling as yours. We expect them to have become fairly literate by the time they start bombarding us, or at least to have learned to work with a dictionary at their elbow.

What puzzles us is that a writer with such a gift for words as you obviously possess should still spell them so atrociously. Unless you are pioneering some form of new spelling? If so, please spare us—and our readers. And don't feel badly about your name; we have several just as strange among our regular roster. You seem to have trouble with ours, anyway . . .

Yours very truly,
TIMOTHY WILTON,
Editor, *Superscience Stories*.

Mr. Timothy Willton,
Editor, *Superscience Stories*,
New York City.

Dear Mr. Willton,

I am just as sorry to get back my laytest offering as you are two have rejected it. All editours are full of regrets, it appeers, and my disappointment is intense. Four I cent the other stories you declined to one magazine after another, and each time they came back with much the same commeants that you have maid. Thow all are knot so polite about the disastruss spelling—and few of them can spell my name correctly.

But you knead knot worry—you will knot sea it again. I shall knot playg you, gnaw any of your competitters, with any maw of my rightings. I am sirtain I shall never produce the sought of matereal you all incist upon, esspecially since I have red sum of the increadible narrowtives witch you habitchually publish. It is ownly to be regretd that I did knot do sew before, but it is knot easy for me to obtane ishoes of your magazines.

Now, having examined sum specimens, it is obvious to me that you do knot want orthenticity in your science fiction. What you want is connflict—and their is, thank the Grate Universal Intellijence, know longer any connflict on Luna, as your righters call the whirled on witch my arkeolojists do there 'humdrum' work. How exiting is there dayly task I am—thow I could knot inform you before—in a better position to judge. Four I, Ustibaz Zabitsu, am one of the two Lunarians of hooze humble exploits you have bean reeding in my unwanted manuscripts.

My meantors having prayed me four the kwaulity of my written reports on my field work as well as four my producttivity, I thawt I mite contribute something to your scionce fiction (of witch I had herd) in the form of a few accounts of my own accomplishmeants and those of my respected colleague Antraz Zartna—who is actually a *dlin* (of opposight sex), but far two engrowst in our mewtual endeavors to waist time in the sought of ammatory nonsense that seams to bee featured in sew much of your scionce fiction, sew-called.

And sew I have bean convaying to you my litterary offerings threw one of our seacret emissories now upon your planette, who has bean receiving my meantal dicktation and converting it into suitable written characters, then mailing the resultent manuscripts. His employmeant as a nite watchman in a big office billding put him in an exellent position to do this chaw ; but, on the other hand, his unfamilliarity with your language and the diskarded tieping masheen he has had to make shift with have plaiced me at a distinkt disadvantage.

However, he will mail no maw. Hencefourth I shall adhear to my beloved excavating and my strictly factuel reports. You will here know maw from me—and will suffer know loss, I feel sure. Thanking you four your kind attention.

Yours very sinserely,

USTIBAZ ZABITSU.

P.S.—You will appreshate that such emissories as the one two witch I refer are hiely necessary now that the invasion of our ainshunt domane by your astronoughts seams to be imminent. I trussed it may knot lead to a reawakening of the connflict witch was long since banished from this satelight, after allmost anihillating the Lunar race—and providing abundant scope four such passive arkeolojists as myself.—U.Z.

—Walter Gillings

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

After an absence of several years, popular author E. C. Tubb returns with a top-notch serial, "Window On the Moon," the first part of which will appear next month. It is a rather prosaic plot, placed not far in the future, with four Moon bases owned by the Russians, American, Chinese and British, the British being the weak sister of the quartette. Amidst the delicately balanced political situation that has arisen, Britain develops a new cybernetic brain—and from there on the plot is no longer prosaic but fast-paced and exciting. Too good to miss, in fact.

Backing up this string opening story will be a novelette by Roy Robinson, "Adaptation," his first solo effort, plus short stories by John Rackham, Lee Harding and James Inglis, and a Guest Editorial by Michael Moorcock—if everything fits into place properly.

Story ratings for No. 123 were :

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| 1. Crack Of Doom, Conclusion | - - | Keith Woodcott |
| 2. Remould | - - - - - | Robert Presslie |
| 3. Schizophrenic | - - - - - | Richard Graham |
| 4. A Question Of Drive | - - - | H. B. Caston |
| 5. Jogi | - - - - - | David Rome |

Martin Regan impersonating Manuel Cabrera, the son of one of Earth's wealthiest men, finds that he needs all his synthetic senses about him to remain alive and unravel the mystery of the planet Cleomon.

DAWN'S LEFT HAND

by LAN WRIGHT

Conclusion

foreword

Martin Regan, roving agent for the Universal Export Agency, leaves Earth for the planet Ferroval to conduct some business for his company. His cabin companion on the starship is Manuel Cabrera, a wealthy businessman, who insists upon having the lower sleeping berth, an essential survival factor, to his mind, as each berth can become a self-sealed life-shell in the event of an accident or having to abandon ship—the extra seconds gained could be the difference between life and death.

Manuel seldom leaves the cabin, except for a brief exercise period each morning, and it is while he is absent on the fourth morning of the journey that disaster strikes and the ship explodes into molten ruins. Regan dives into Manuel's berth and is safely ejected from the inferno, but suffers severe burns to face, hands and legs. The life-shell emits a continuous radio signal and is eventually picked up and Regan recovers consciousness in a

hospital on the planet Lichar, where alien surgeons remould his face and give him prosthetic limbs as well as optical lenses for his eyes.

During the months of his slow recovery he discovers that he has been mistaken for Manuel Cabrera and owing to the slowness of communications it is not easy to notify Cabrera's relatives. It is two years before he leaves hospital, to find that he is a rich man, the insurance company who covered the risk having paid him one hundred thousand credits. Transhipped to Ferroval he finds Cabrera's father, and two cousins, Carlo and Armand, waiting for him. He finally convinces them that he is not Manuel but the elder Cabrera decides that Regan must take the place of his son—powerful political forces are lined up against his wealthy empire and the death of Manuel was to have been a focal point in the extermination of the Cabrerases.

Because he has no choice, Regan agrees to impersonate Manuel, and leaves Ferroval for Earth on the Cabrera's heavily guarded spaceship. Arriving at "Xanadu" the Cabrera's estate in the Southern Andes, he is accepted as one of the family by everyone except Manuel's mother, and Giselle, his 'sister.' Retiring for the night, he finds a message advising him to leave "Xanadu" inferring that he is to be the bait to recover a missing personal-carrier which was lost when the real Manuel died.

Regan follows instructions and eventually arrives in Santiago, where he is immediately picked up by two men who take him to another mountain retreat owned by a man named Malatest, who wants him to open the Cabrera 'carrier' which evidently contains political plans for the overthrow of Earth. Regan plays for time, is locked in a room for the night, but escapes by copter after killing Malatest. His flyer is picked up by the Cabrera private spaceship and he finds that the plot was organised by Carlo and Armand and not old Cabrera—his 'cousins' assuming that the carrier would blow up, killing Regan and destroying the plans.

Old Cabrera is contrite and Regan is in greater favour than ever, settling into the household but feeling the need for some positive action. After a private discussion with Giselle, who informs him that Manuel had once mentioned a planet called Cleomon and a man named Arfon Plender, Regan proposes that he takes the Cabrera spaceship and returns to Ferroval where Manuel was supposed to have met someone. Perhaps there, despite two years' lapse of time, he might pick up the threads of the mystery. Cabrera agrees.

n i n e t e e n

With the decision made that he desired so much, Regan found the next hours slipping away from him before he realised it. There was a kaleidoscopic impression of revolt from Carlo and Armand that mingled with approval from his 'uncle,' Pedro, and a wistful farewell from Giselle. There were lights on the landing field of Xanadu, lights in the black night sky that were not stars nor planets, and lights on the ground that marked the spawning place of the city state. And all of them merged into the vast, blue globe of Earth that fell away behind them as the small vessel took him out to the great ship orbiting beyond the terran atmosphere.

The cabin was as it had been barely three days before—only three days, and yet they seemed a lifetime. The crew was the same and so were the officers, yet, this time, there was a subtle difference. This time Regan was the big man on board, not old Cabrera—and Regan had a taste of personal power that he had never known in his life before.

The captain, a lean, hard man named Quadros, welcomed him stiffly but with a slight obsequiousness that wasn't lost on Regan. There was too, in the man's ice blue eyes, a hint of excitement and anticipation. All of them knew the story of the Ferroval cruiser, and all of them knew that Regan—as Manuel Cabrera—had been the sole survivor. It was common knowledge, too, that where Regan went then danger would not be far behind. His motives and the reasons for the presence of that danger were closed secrets, but the very fact of their existence was sufficient to temper the atmosphere within the great ship with the same excitement and anticipation that was shown by Quadros. Regan went straight to his cabin and slept through the night, peaceful in the knowledge that he had won the first round.

Next morning he was in no hurry to rouse himself. The course of the ship lay towards Ferroval, and he was well content. He rose, took a leisurely toilet, and headed for the ornate dining cabin—and breakfast.

His next move was already planned, but there was no immediate hurry in acting on his plans. The captain of the vessel had accepted him as Manuel Cabrera; the old man's orders had been clear and concise—the ship was Regan's to do with as he wished. As he left his cabin and walked along the

wide, main corridor Regan felt a slight, smug sense of satisfaction, that things had, thus far, proceeded with a smoothness that was flattering to his ego and soothing to his nerves.

He entered the dining cabin—and the satisfaction vanished like a snow flake in a furnace as the dark figure of Carlo looked at him from the head of the vast table.

"Good morning, cousin," his tone was slightly mocking, and a light smile played across his lips. "You are late in rising."

"What the hell are you doing here?" snarled Regan, shaken from his placidity by the complete unexpectedness of the man's presence. "Is this another—?" He stopped, the question unfinished as he remembered the stewards who were probably within earshot.

"This was my idea, cousin," said Carlo. "I came aboard in another ferry a little after you arrived." He smiled again. "I thought that my presence might be of use to you."

"It might," Regan retorted sourly. The frustration of the situation sent a tremor of anger through him, and he felt, not for the first time, that Carlo had outsmarted him. The possibility that the black man would take such a course of action had never entered Regan's head, and yet, now that it had happened, he knew that it was something he should have thought about—something he should have guarded against.

"I warn you, Carlo," he said softly and grimly, "I have my own plans, and I shall carry them through irrespective of your presence." His voice dropped even lower. "And if you try to stop me—"

He crossed to the table and sat down opposite Carlo. The sudden turn of events had robbed him of his appetite, and he pecked with utter disinterest at the food, cursing his own short sight. He wondered what action Cabrera would take once he found that Carlo was not at Xanadu. In sudden alarm he glanced at his watch and saw that it was ten in the morning ship time—and ship time would coincide with the Sud-americano region that embraced Xanadu! It meant that Carlo's absence would already have been noticed.

Regan got up from the table and crossed to the intercom unit that lay flush against one wall. He punched the control panel and said, "Give me the captain."

The break of a second was enough for him to look at Carlo and to note with satisfaction the slight frown that creased the

black man's brow. Then the face of Quadros swam small on the screen, and Regan ordered, briefly, "Captain, I want a complete blanket on communications—no outgoing calls under any circumstances, and no acknowledgement of incoming messages."

"It might be difficult, senor," said Quadros uncertainly.

"Nevertheless, it will be done."

"As you say, senor."

"And I want a conference in my cabin in—er—one hour. You and the navigation officer. Make it at eleven hundred."

"Eleven hundred, senor," agreed Quadros, and Regan broke the connection.

As he turned back to the table Carlo looked at him thoughtfully. "You have flashes of inspiration, cousin," he commented.

"I'm learning," grinned Regan, and some of his well-being returned now that he had foreseen at least one possible source of future trouble. The thoughts comforted him, and so did the further realisation that Carlo—despite his initiative—would be utterly helpless aboard the ship. The old man had given his orders and they would be obeyed. The vessel was at Regan's command.

His breakfast took on a better flavour, and he found added confidence in the manner of his thinking—it had a force that was new, an incisive bite that was compatible with the position of authority in which he found himself.

A thought crossed his mind, and he looked across at Carlo. "Does your uncle know that you are here?"

"Armand will have told him by now."

"And no doubt you have left a suitable explanation for your conduct?"

"The security of our interests should be reason enough."

Regan nodded thoughtfully. He was fully aware of the fact that he had bulldozed the old man into acceptance of his plans, and that further consideration of them could well reveal the inconsistencies which he had known existed. In the cold, clear light of day, and after a night of thought, the old man would almost certainly approve of the action which Carlo had taken.

Regan's main comfort lay in the fact that his own plans were secret to all save himself. At least in that respect he had been sufficiently prudent to realise that secrecy was of vital importance. The outcome of all that he had planned was shrouded in the mists of the future, and—not for the first time—he asked

himself just why he was doing it ? He had told himself time and again that he was in mortal danger without the support and shield of Cabrera, and in his heart he knew that this was true to a large extent. In his heart, too, he knew that this wasn't the real reason for his actions. Of late his thinking had developed a clarity that it had never possessed before ; it was sharp and objective, brutally frank in its final assessments—and it told Regan that he was doing not what had to be done, but rather that which he wished to do.

The fever of the unknown was in his blood ; action for the sake of action was his goal ; danger for the sake of danger tingled his nerves with eager delight.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost eleven. Carlo was looking across the table with a sardonic twist to his eyebrows that wasn't lost on Regan.

"Will you join me in my cabin, cousin ?" he asked.

Carlo eyed him in surprise. "Am I to be trusted with your secrets ?"

"They will do you no good," Regan told him, "but your presence will be less remarkable than your absence." He grinned at Carlo. "In fact, cousin, your presence will do much to aid me."

He left the table and Carlo followed him out of the cabin and along the corridor. They found Quadros and another officer waiting for them, and Regan led the way into his suite.

"Please, gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable." Regan sat down in one of the large easy chairs and watched as the others drew their own seats into a semi-circle before him.

"Senor," said Quadros, "this is Lahaye, Chief Navigator."

Regan nodded and studied the plump-faced officer from behind the camouflage of his dark glasses. He was young, ascetic despite his red face, and he had an air of precision that seemed to be a part of all men who have to do with the science of mathematics.

"Gentlemen," Regan began. "your course, on orders from Xanadu, is for Ferroval."

Lahaye glanced sideways at Quadros, and the captain nodded. "It is, senor."

"And further orders from Senor Cabrera himself have placed the ship and all aboard her under my direct control."

"Yes, senor." The questions in Quadros' mind were written clear upon his thin face.

"Tell me, Lahaye. Do you know of a planet called Cleomon?"

As he asked the question Regan was watching Carlo, and although the black man sat a little straighter in his chair there was only puzzlement on his face, and Regan knew that the information that Giselle had given him meant little or nothing to Carlo.

The navigator nodded. "Yes, sir. I have heard of it."

"Where does it lie?"

"Towards the Rim, and the Galactic west of Earth. I can tell exactly when I have consulted my records."

"And how long a flight is it?"

"From Earth?"

"Yes."

"Twelve days, sir."

Regan could feel the tension mounting in the cabin. All of them realised that he was not simply asking questions for the sake of asking them, and all of them had some inkling of what he was going to say next. Carlo gazed at him stonily, his face set in a tight mask of grim understanding. He knew that Regan had tricked them all.

"Our course is for Cleomon, Captain," he ordered.

Quadros was smiling openly, and Regan felt a slight tremor of amusement as he realised that the captain was revelling in this sudden cloak and dagger change of plan.

"Yes, senor. I shall avoid Earth and take a course which will carry us in an arc towards the sector that holds Cleomon."

Regan smiled and nodded. "You read my thoughts well, Quadros. Keep well clear of the normal trade routes, oh, and Lahaye, you will let me have as much information about our new destination as you can find in your records. I know little of the planet, and I wish to know more before we arrive."

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave us. My cousin and I have much to talk on."

The two officers rose and left the cabin; Carlo sat stiffly in his chair eyeing Regan coldly.

"Well, cousin?" asked Regan.

"I think," said Carlo softly, "that we may have under-rated you, Regan."

"You had thought that there would be orders on Ferroval to deprive me of my position and place you in command." Regan smiled and nodded. "I, too, had thought of that."

"But why Cleomon?" Carlo leaned forward in his chair. "What do you know that we do not?"

"You know as much—almost—as I do," Regan told him. "My aim was Cleomon the moment I asked Old Cabrera for this ship. But if I had told him that I was headed for another destination than Ferroval—do you think he would have allowed me so much latitude?"

Carlo shook his head and relaxed. His face told Regan that which he needed to know, and it confirmed his earlier thought—there would be orders waiting on Ferroval, and those orders would be the later thoughts of the old man after he had had time to consider just what Regan had talked him into doing.

"What lies on Cleomon?"

Regan shook his head. "I do not know—and on that you have my word. I have a name, two names, but they mean nothing."

Carlo stood up and spread his arms wide in a gesture of acceptance. "I do not know what you intend, cousin," he smiled bitterly, "but, until Cleomon reveals the answer, I am with you."

twenty

The length of the trip to Cleomon was thirteen days, and for all of that time Carlo was an agreeable companion. To Regan's surprise the black man put all thoughts of the future from him, an attitude of mind that he made clear from the instant he gave his support to Regan. He spent many hours teaching Regan the ancient game of chess at which he was a master. In the privacy of their respective cabins he and Regan talked for further long hours, and from Carlo, Regan learned a great deal about the family Cabrera and its mighty past that was spread over three centuries of time from the very beginning of Earth's colonisation of extra-solar planets. Carlo painted a vast canvas in vivid detail of the growth and ramifications not only of the family Cabrera but of the other families that had vied with them in the spread of Mankind.

He told of the aristocratic Cornwalls, entitled Lords and Earls and Barons by the grateful sovereign who had gained so much from their efforts. Of the Quintos whose greatness was built on metal and stone and plastic as the city state grew upon their shoulders. He spoke of the Orloffs and their great fleets

of ships that spanned the star routes ; of the Carvellos who had forsaken Earth and taken a world of their own far out in space from whence they ruled a web of intrigue, balancing political power as a juggler balances his clubs.

And Regan listened, fascinated. Some of the names he had heard before, some of them had been vague rumours of rich men learned as he travelled between the planets of Mankind, yet not truly understood for what they were—and now, he knew.

In the quietness of his cabin Regan read the records of the navigator, Lahaye, and learned of Cleomon. Not that there was a great deal to learn, for Cleomon was a small world on the Rim of the Galaxy, one that had been settled but recently by terran colonists—if ten decades could be called recent. It had a population of little more than a million, and these were spread over one main area of the planet in the equatorial regions where the climate was temperate. Farther out from the equator the conditions rapidly degenerated into a wilderness of ice and snow, that made terran arctic regions look like a children's playground. The one thing that had made Cleomon habitable was its lack of axial deviation. Even five degrees would have taken it from the grasping hands of Man.

It was a world rich in mineral wealth, and each year more and more chemicals, metals and ores left to fill the gaping maw of the mother world, Earth.

Regan stood with Carlo and Quadros on the control bridge of the great ship, and looked at the golden sphere of the planet through the main viewing screen. It was much like other alien worlds seen from such a distance, and, like all of them, it had none of the misty beauty of Earth. It was sharp and clearly defined against the blackness of space, and the halo of its atmosphere seemed to cling to it unwillingly, as if, at any moment, it would fly off into space and leave the round orange of the world to its own devices. And this, too, was strange to Regan, for on Earth the blue haze of atmosphere moulded and softened the lines of the world below, and nestled against it as lovingly as any child against its mother. As he looked at Cleomon Regan wondered if alien eyes always found beauty in their own surroundings, and only ugliness where strangeness ruled. "Do they know of us on Cleomon, Quadros?" he asked.

"Yes, senor. I have notified them of our arrival".

"No, no. I mean the family of Cabrera—is it known here?"

"There is no world in all the terran-ruled Galaxy that does not know of the family Cabrera," put in Carlo.

"Nevertheless, cousin, I must be sure," replied Regan. "It may be that the power of our name will be needed and useful."

"You need not fear that," smiled the black man.

Lahaye came out of the small cubicle to one side of the bridge control that was his navigation centre, and handed a sheet of paper to Quadros.

The captain read it, and turned to Regan, "We have permission to land a tender, senior."

"Then let it be so."

"Pardon, senior, but that will not be possible for another six hours. The main spaceport is in the night half of the planet, and the dawn there is still two hours away. I have arranged a landing for you at ten in the morning local time."

Regan frowned and glanced at his watch. It was three in the afternoon ship time, and that meant he had a long day ahead of him. There was, too, the usual disruption of personal routine that was common after a long trip, and, like most regular travellers, Regan had long experience of worlds with differing time rate, shorter days, longer days—the general discomfort of new worlds and new surroundings. He looked back at Quadros and nodded.

"We will eat, Captain, and we will land at the time you have arranged. My cousin will accompany me, and you will land with the tender to see what further action I shall take." He felt, rather than saw, Carlo's surprise, and as they left the bridge he smiled at the black man, and said, "You didn't think that I would leave you aboard to do some mischief."

"Little chance of that," smiled Carlo, wryly. "No, I am surprised rather that you wish me to be with you when your secrets are revealed."

Regan laughed harshly. "Secrets, is it! Carlo, I am as much in the dark as you. I told you, I have one piece of information that you do not. And, that apart, I am playing this whole thing by instinct."

He rested for a while in his cabin against the long day that lay ahead, and later he ate with Carlo in the dining cabin. Later still, he took his seat beside Quadros in the small passenger ferry that was to take them to the surface of Cleomon.

The world that came up to meet them was cold and uninviting. From each pole the white caps of ice spread out towards the equator, and for only a few hundred miles on either side of that equator did the more colourful patchwork quilt of the fertile lands spread themselves beneath the warmth of the parent sun.

The main landing area lay close to the largest centre of population—Morven—a town of around a hundred thousand people, and that fact alone told Regan that he had left the city state of Earth far behind. He was back in a universe that knew of towns and cities and villages and hamlets ; where there were green fields and open spaces, wide forests and infertile deserts. He was in a universe that Man had conquered, yet by that conquest had become more of a slave than ever in his history before. Behind him lay Earth with her teeming millions, starving and suffocating in a prison of their own making ; before them lay a hostile Galaxy wherein the colony worlds waited like carrion birds beside a corpse that is not yet dead.

As he looked down at the golden globe expanding before them, Regan shuddered as with cold, and wondered what emotions had evoked his own temerity in daring to place himself within such a cauldron of hatred and distrust.

The landing was neat and uneventful, and their reception was informal. Truly, the name of Cabrera meant something even here on a backwater world. A uniformed official greeted them in a tidy functional office, and after the brief formalities had been accomplished, the man said, "We are honoured to have members of the family of Cabrera visit our world."

Regan felt the cold humour of his position tug at the corners of his mouth as he answered, gravely, "We are honoured to be here."

"Anything we can do to aid you—"

"Indeed, there is," broke in Regan, "one thing."

The man raised his eyebrows in polite enquiry.

"Where would we be able to enquire about one of your citizens ?"

The official shrugged. "There are several ways. The public records office is the most comprehensive, but, like all public offices it takes time. There would also be the criminal records of the local police, though these," he smiled depreciatingly, "would hardly be suitable for your purposes."

"Who knows?" Regan returned the smile. "Thank you for your help."

Together with Carlo and Quadros he left the office, and once out of the building and in the bright light of the morning sun, he said, "Quadros, this may take longer than I thought. You will take the tender back to the ship and await our call. My cousin and I will pursue our search further with an hotel as our base."

"Yes, senor. And if I should wish to contact you?"

"I will notify you of our whereabouts, but do not call me unless something of the utmost importance is concerned."

"Would it not be better, cousin," put in Carlo, "for the teacher to remain here?"

Regan smiled seraphically. "I think not, and in any event the presence of Quadros aboard the ship may be necessary."

The look on Carlo's face told him that he had won another small point—that Carlo realised that he had been effectively marooned on Cleomon and right under Regan's eye.

On the recommendation of a spaceport official they registered at the largest hotel in the town of Morven, and, by terran standards, the place was modest, quiet, and totally unexciting. By the time their small hand cases had been deposited in their rooms it was time for lunch, and although neither of them felt particularly hungry, each of them was sufficiently experienced to know that the sooner they broke ship routine and allowed themselves to be absorbed in the local time flow, then the easier would be their existence. Regan regretted that he had not waited a few hours more and arranged for the ship's arrival to coincide the two time rates. It was a minor point but one which he should have considered. His eagerness to proceed with his enquiries was excuse enough, and he was loathe to waste time unnecessarily.

As they ate lunch in the hotel restaurant, Carlo asked him, "And now, cousin?"

"I am looking for someone," Regan told him simply.

"That much I guessed from your questions at the spaceport. Who is this someone?"

Regan shrugged. "I have only a name."

"And you came to Cleomon with so little?" Carlo looked at him across the table in blank astonishment. "And where did you learn this name that may be so important?"

Regan shook his head. "That is something I am not prepared to divulge. Carlo, do you think I am the sort of man who would come on a mission like this if I thought it would turn out to be nothing more than a wild goose chase?"

The black man gazed at him steadily but said nothing.

"Back on Earth," went on Regan, "the old man was sitting around for eighteen months waiting for Manuel to get fit enough to take up where he left off. Is that logical, Carlo? Is that the action of a man who has destiny by the tail? For two years you sat and waited and did nothing—and now, you ask me, an outsider, why a single name may be important."

"We had no choice. There was nothing we could do save guard you and hope that all would be well."

"Hope," sneered Regan. "Only a fool relies on hope. The shape of the future is decided by actions, not by hope or faith or philosophy—"

"You're wrong," Carlo interrupted him sharply. "It is because of those three things that Man has come so far, and it is because of the material approach that you propound that Mankind finds itself in the trouble which we are trying to combat. There are times when you can fight fire with fire, and this is one of those times, but because it applies in this situation it does not mean that fire can build or create—"

"You think that I am a second fire?"

The black man smiled slightly and nodded. "Yes, I think you are the power that we needed to drive us on, but that does not mean that your methods are the panacea to all our ills."

"All this does nothing to solve the immediate problem," said Regan flatly. "I have questions to ask, and if we are to go further I need the right answers to them."

"The records office?"

"Yes."

The remainder of the meal passed in comparative silence as each of them pondered on his own thoughts. Regan brooded on the problem of Arfon Plender, and wondered how two years and more would have affected the man's position in relation to Manuel Cabrera. Had he known Manuel personally? How frequently had they met? The immediate answers to those questions would be covered by the fact that he was—as Regan or as Manuel—completely unrecognisable from the physical

standpoint. It would be later that trouble could arise, because ultimately he would have to ask questions, and the very nature of those questions would breed suspicion—the suspicion that he was not Manuel Cabrera. And once Arfon Plender knew that—!

As they left the hotel restaurant, Regan said, "I'll call the Records Bureau from my room, Carlo. It will probably take them some time to make their enquiries, and a personal call might be a waste of time."

"And then—what?"

"Then," Regan smiled, "as we are on a strange planet, why don't we do some sight seeing?"

His video call to the Bureau of Records was well received—a further indication of the power of the name of Cabrera. The official who dealt with his call frowned doubtfully as Regan made his request.

"Arfon Plender! And that is all the information you have?"

Regan nodded. "It is little enough, I know. Yet the matter is of some importance."

"Then I will do what I can, though it may take a few days with so little to go on."

"I understand. There is one other thing," Regan said, "if you find this man, please do nothing to let him know that I am making these enquiries."

The official frowned at him from the tiny screen, and Regan realised that the request had caused immediate suspicion.

"Do not misunderstand my motives," he went hastily. "It is merely that where the family of Cabrera is concerned I would prefer that no publicity be given to activities and our contacts for," he smiled deprecatingly, "obvious reasons."

The frown vanished and was replaced by a smile as the man nodded and said, "Of course. It shall be as you wish."

The remainder of the day passed quietly, and so did the next, and the one that followed. Regan checked twice each day with Quadros in orbit far out from the planet's surface, but each time a bored, "Nothing to report," was all the substance of the captain's words.

Together with Carlo he saw something of the city and the country around it, and thought little of what he saw. Cleomon was a new world, colonised barely a century before, and it was a world of freshness, of bustle, of expansion and hard work.

What entertainment there was seemed rough and unsophisticated to Regan's eyes, and his unprepossessing appearance did not help him in his social contacts.

The pair of them were, too clearly, offworlders, and they were, too clearly, rich. Private star cruisers seldom visited Cleomon, and news of the Cabrera vessel was common knowledge within a few hours of their landing. They were greeted everywhere with deference, but always, in the background was a reservation, a semi-hostility that a colony world reserved for men of Earth.

Regan made several calls to the Bureau, but each time he learned nothing save that the search was progressing as rapidly as was possible. The days passed and each hour grew more weary than the one before as the situation hung and brooded upon both of them. Carlo accepted the situation far more easily than did Regan, and in his attitude Regan read the training of years and the breeding of centuries. Not for the first time did he realise the gulf that there was between him and the black nephew of old Cabrera.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, the word for which they had been waiting came to them.

Regan took the call in his own room after the hotel receptionist had told him that he was wanted. He summoned Carlo and together they hurried from the lounge to his room on the first floor. Once there he pushed the button of the video set and held a pair of crossed fingers for Carlo's amused inspection as he watched the grey face of the Bureau official swim small on the screen.

"Mister Cabrera, good day."

"Good day. You have some news for me?" Regan was hard put to control his impatience.

"I regret the delay which has occurred, however, it would not have been so long if I had consulted the criminal records of the law officers first of all."

Regan felt a coldness grow within him. There was about the tiny face on the silver screen something that told him the answer was not one that he wished to hear, yet the fascination of his own desire for that answer held him in a steely grip.

"Go on," he said.

"Arfon Plender," replied the man coldly, "was murdered sixteen terran months ago."

twenty-one

Regan sat numbed with shock. Until this moment he had been so sure—so absolutely sure—that here, on Cleomon, lay the whole answer to his problem, and to the problems of the Cabrerias and of Earth. And now the door had slammed shut in his face.

"I'm sorry—" he was aware that the man was still speaking.

"I said, I regret that the information is so unsatisfactory—"

"Oh, yes. Of course." Frantically, he tried to pull himself back to reality. "If I wish to know more, I suppose—"

"The police records for this city will give full details."

"Thank you." Regan broke the connection.

And still he could not realise what had happened. Sixteen months ago, the man said. Arfon Plender was dust with his ancestors, and had been so while Regan lay in hospital fighting for his life. The flow of the universe had moved too fast for him ever to have caught up; it had been too late sixteen months ago, and only now did he realise it.

"Well, Regan?"

He looked up at the sombre figure of Carlo, startled out of his reverie.

"What now?" asked Carlo. "Where do we go now that your man has slipped away from you?"

Regan waved one hand in vague disgust. "I don't know. I need time to think. There has to be another way." He strode a few short paces as a wild animal stalks the cage that holds it. Somehow, somewhere he had to open up the trail again.

"The law," he snapped. "They must know something, there must be records of Plender; what he was; what he did. Perhaps in them we may find something."

"You are clutching at straws," Carlo whispered harshly.

"And what else should I clutch at?" Regan demanded angrily. "I have come too far to go back without a fight. No, Carlo, there are still questions to be asked, and perhaps some of the answers are still there to be heard."

Carlo sighed. "Then it is to be the police records."

Regan nodded.

"Today?"

The clock on the small table beside the bed told Regan that it was almost five, and he shook his head. "No. Tomorrow will be time enough."

The night that followed was a wretched and almost sleepless one for Regan as he pondered the desperation of his position. He had listened to Giselle, and had been fired by his own newborn desire for excitement. He had tricked the old man, and the gamble he had taken had stumbled at the first obstacle. Outside his hotel window the night sounds of Morven were magnified by his frustration as he tossed and turned. Why had Plender been murdered? How had it been done? Had they caught the people responsible?

And even as he asked the questions one fact made itself abundantly clear—someone had known about Plender and his connection with Manuel Cabrera, and that person was responsible for the murder.

The logical train of his thoughts didn't relieve the tension either of his mind or his body, and by the time full daylight had dawned he lay limp and weary on his bed, dozing a little, yet knowing that sleep was as far away as it had been the whole night through.

At breakfast Carlo eyed him curiously, but made no comment on his appearance, and when the meal was over they made their way across Morven to the headquarters of the police department.

The name of Cabrera worked its usual magic, and they were shown into a quiet, austere office by a uniformed officer who promised them prompt attention.

"Do you know what you are after, Regan?" asked Carlo, as they made themselves comfortable in two large, padded chairs.

"Not really." Regan rubbed his tired eyes with his finger tips. "Someone who knew Plender, perhaps. His wife—if he had one, his family, friends—anyone who might help."

"I've never asked you this before," said Carlo, "but now I think you might tell me—who was Arfon Plender?"

Regan chuckled ironically. "I doubt if you will believe me, but I haven't the vaguest idea. I only heard his name once—"

Behind them the office door opened, breaking into the thread of conversation, and Regan half rose to his feet before a voice said, "Sit down, sit down, gentlemen. Please, ceremony is not necessary here. I am Sarwadi, Chief Superintendent."

Regan relaxed again, and took in the details of the plump, brown-skinned man with his neat uniform and carefully groomed black hair. His face was fleshy, friendly, with a smile that looked to be perpetual around his full lipped mouth. His

eyes were dark and penetrating, and they belied the smile beneath them. Sarwadi was pleasant, benign—and tough.

He seated himself at the desk, and placed a light coloured folder beside his right hand.

"You are the Messires Cabrera?" His eyes looked at them each in turn. "And what can I do for you?"

"We are interested in a murder," Regan said, "one that was committed here some little time ago."

"The Plender affair." Sarwadi nodded. "I heard of your interest for the case from the Bureau of Records. It was I who authorised the release of our files for your information."

"That is very good of you," said Regan.

"What is it you wish to know?" Sarwadi tapped the slim folder. "It is all in here—all, that is, of which we are sure."

"How did Plender die?"

"Ostensibly in a fire which completely destroyed his house. But there was enough of his body left for identification, and also for a post-mortem to tell us that he was poisoned first. He was dead before the fire started."

"I see." So far as Regan was concerned the information added one fact to his knowledge. Not only was Plender murdered, but care had been taken to destroy any records that might have existed concerning Manuel Cabrera. "There was nothing saved from the fire?"

"Nothing."

"Did he leave any family? Wife, children, perhaps?"

"No." Sarwadi shook his head. "He was a bachelor—a rover who never settled. Oh, he had a home here, on Cleomon, but he roamed the Galaxy for all his life, and his house was just a place for him to keep his belongings while he himself wandered through the stars along the Rim." Sarwadi sat back in his chair. "I have heard it said that he visited every colony world at one time or another—and a lot of worlds that would never become colonies. He was one of the last of the old professional explorers, and he sold his secrets to the highest bidder. When he died he was a rich man—one of the elite of this poor world."

A professional explorer! Regan felt his heart lift within him. This was the sort of man who might well have claimed the attention of Manuel Cabrera. And he felt the dullness of disappointment as he thought of Plender's lost records.

He looked across the desk at Sarwadi. "Is there nothing left that might be of use to us? No papers, documents, records?"

"Gentlemen," Sarwadi leaned forward in his chair and rested his forearms on the desk, "I am only interested in you because of your interest in Plender. The murder was never solved, and that is most unusual these days, for very obvious reasons. The very fact of its occurrence tells me that there is something big at the back of it—some off-world motive that had the power and the resources to commit a crime of this nature, and to make sure that it is never solved." He tapped the folder with his right hand. "This file has been open for a long time. It is the only one of its kind in our records, and I want to see it closed."

"Just where does that get us?" demanded Carlo suddenly. "We are interested only in certain information that Plender was holding pending a visit from my cousin. This information should have been passed over to us two year ago, but circumstances prevented it."

Regan shot a surprised glance at Carlo. The man's intervention was surprising, and the manner of his deductions was more amazing still. Carlo was nobody's fool.

"The Ferroval cruiser," commented Sarwadi, and Regan looked back at the officer to meet his steady, searching gaze. "I have heard of it, gentlemen. When I learned that you were on Cleomon, I put the two facts together, and I assumed that the attempt to kill you," he nodded to Regan, "and the murder of Arfon Plender were closely connected. It occurred to me that we might be able to help one another."

"It is not impossible," agreed Regan, "but it is unlikely."

Sarwadi made a pyramid of his finger tips and studied them almost myopically. "Plender," he said, "was away from Cleomon for long periods, and, because of that, he appointed a local man to be his agent and to handle his affairs while he was away."

Regan felt a hint of excitement flare within him, and beside him Carlo stirred fractionally.

"This fact was not generally known," went on Sarwadi. "The agreement between them was kept secret on the insistence of Plender, but our enquiries uncovered the details. All this happened after the murder of Plender, of course. The man concerned was a lawyer named Henri Tecwyn, and he handled

all Plender's business for many years. If anyone knows anything at all about the business which you were to conduct with Arfon Plender, then it will be this man, Tecwyn."

"If he knew so much," said Carlo, "why was he not killed at the time of Plender's death?"

"As I said, their relationship was kept secret. Plender trusted no one, and although Tecwyn admitted acting for Plender he didn't make this admission until some time after his client's death. And that was the only admission he would make." Sarwadi shrugged. "In law I was powerless to coerce him into revealing Plender's secrets—"

"But you think—" began Regan.

"I think that he may tell you what he would not tell me," said Sarwadi. "He must have known of any connection between Plender and the family of Cabrera, and, knowing that, he may be able to supply you with any information you want."

"Where is this man?" demanded Regan.

"Softly, softly." Sarwadi held up his hand. "I told you, I have a murder to solve."

Regan gestured impatiently. "All right. What do you wish from us?"

"Your promise that you will tell me anything that might help in closing this file." He tapped the folder with one forefinger.

Regan glanced at Carlo, but the black man was studying the floor between his feet, and there was no help there. Carlo said, more plainly than by any spoken words, that Regan had to make his own decision. The black man had deduced the situation as far as he could, but beyond that point he could not and would not go. The decision was Regan's.

"Well?" insisted Sarwadi, gently.

"I will promise you this," Regan said slowly. "You may be present while I talk to this man, Tecwyn, and you may ask anything that you think may help you. If it is within my power I will answer you, but beyond that I cannot go. There is one assurance that I must have in return."

"And that is?"

"That we shall not be kept here, on Cleomon, for any protracted legal proceedings that may result."

Sarwadi studied him thoughtfully. "You are asking a great deal."

"I am offering a great deal as well."

Sarwadi hesitated.

"I have nothing to hide," Regan insisted. "My only interest is in the information that I hoped to get from Plender. Whatever that information is may still be valuable, even after two years, and I do not wish to have its value spoiled. If it will help you solve your crime," he shrugged, "then it is of double use."

Sarwadi nodded slowly. "Very well. I accept."

"Good. Then where is this man, Tecwyn? When can I see him?"

Sarwadi smiled. "He is here, in the next office. You can see him now."

twenty-two

The man that Sarwadi brought into the office was small and white haired, with a thin, pale face, and a stooped gait. His eyes were bright and blue and beady, and they bored into Regan with a prescient gleam that was unsettling. Regan studied the man from behind his dark glasses, and decided that Plender had made an admirable choice, for Tecwyn looked what he was—a close mouthed, hard-headed, quick-minded advocate.

After the brief introductions had been completed, Regan said, "No doubt you are aware that I was to meet Arfon Plender here, on Cleomon, more than two years ago."

"I had heard of it," agreed Tecwyn amiably, "and, so far as I was aware, that meeting took place."

The silence that followed blanketed the room like a cloud, and Regan felt his senses reel slightly with the shock that the implication of Tecwyn's words engendered.

"What did you say?" whispered Carlo.

"I should have thought my meaning was quite clear," replied Tecwyn precisely. "Someone came here who claimed to be Manuel Cabrera. Plender and he met, and their business was completed. I may say that the—ah—contract between them had been conducted over a period of several terran years. The meeting of two years ago was the climax of a long period of negotiation."

Regan felt his stomach churning as the bright eyes of the lawyer bored into him. The implication of Tecwyn's surprising

statement wasn't lost on him, and if Tecwyn knew that Plender and Manuel had met previously then his masquerade as Manuel was ended before it was even begun. He wondered, with sudden panic, how much support and protection he would get from Carlo.

Sarwadi said quietly, "Then if this is true, who was the man who visited Plender two years ago?"

"His murderer," said Carlo grimly. "He had got what he wanted, and, later, he organised the removal of the only person who might have been able to upset his plans."

"Then why did he wait so long before doing it?" asked the superintendent.

"Because Manuel was thought to be dead, killed in the Ferroval cruiser," snapped Carlo. "And then—later—they found that he was alive. They did the only thing possible—they got rid of Arfon Plender."

Regan felt thankfulness flood through him as the tension was removed; Carlo, too, had foreseen the danger, and with consummate ease he had extricated Regan from the trap that seemed to be opening before him. Carlo was his ally! The black man's position seemed to have changed a great deal over the past days, and Regan wondered if he, too, was getting involved in the thrill of solving the mystery, as Regan was himself.

"You knew the reason for that last meeting between Plender and myself?" Regan said to Tecwyn.

"Yes. It was to settle final details of your joint enterprise."

"And you were there?"

Tecwyn shook his head. "Plender conducted all his own business. I was merely his—ah—repository."

"And you say that this final meeting was accomplished here, on Cleomon, between Plender and the—the stranger who took my place?"

"It was."

"For the benefit of Sarwadi," put in Carlo smoothly, "would you explain the details of the project?"

"If you wish, I will tell what little I know." Tecwyn took a sheaf of papers from the case which he had brought with him. "It concerned an agreement reached between Manuel Cabrera and an alien race known as the Kaldori—"

"I have heard of them," murmured Carlo.

"I should hope so," snapped Tecwyn acidly, "since you were doing business with them. The documents handed to me state that Manuel Cabrera was acting on behalf of the family Cabrera."

"You mistake me," retorted Carlo easily. "The details of the business were kept a close secret, and although we knew the bare facts of what was involved, the names of the parties concerned were kept secret from us—even my cousin, Manuel, did not know the full details. That was why the meeting which you referred to was arranged with Plender."

"I see." Tecwyn nodded in understanding, and Regan breathed again, thanking his stars for the agile brain of the black man. Without his nonchalant probing and easy, deceptive manoeuvring Regan would have been lost within minutes—and he had sense enough to know it.

"As I was saying," went on Tecwyn, "the Kaldori, under the agreement, ceded colonisation control of two planets within their system to the parties represented by Arfon Plender, and in exchange they received guarantees concerning the exploitation of the two worlds."

"I should explain," put in Carlo, turning to Sarwadi, "that the Kaldori are a silicon based life form."

"That is so," agreed Tecwyn. "They inhabit the fourth planet of the sun Alpha Regis—a cold world by any standards, but one which is well suited to their needs. They exercise control over the other five worlds of the system, but they have colonised only the fifth and sixth. The second and third worlds are quite unsuited to them from an environmental point of view, and yet they are interested in them because of the mineral wealth involved."

"How did all this concern Plender?" asked Sarwadi.

"I am coming to that. Plender negotiated with the Kaldori for the family Cabrera to take control of these two worlds. They were to be handed over intact, complete with the extensive installations that the Kaldori had built over many years. These installations took the form of sealed cities and sealed work units of many kinds. The cost of building and maintaining them was enormous, and almost cancelled out the economic benefits to be gained. Plender visited the Kaldori worlds several years ago during one of his many exploratory trips, and it didn't take him long to realise that the planets concerned were

ideal for colonisation by terrans. He decided to negotiate some form of terran control with the Central Government of Earth—until the family Cabrera came upon the scene.”

“I think I can add a little to the story at this point,” broke in Carlo, and for the third time in almost as many minutes, Regan marvelled at the facility with which the black man manoeuvred the situation so that they were placed on a more substantial footing. He knew that he himself could have made some good guesses on the strength of what Tecwyn had told them, but he knew, also, that he would never have the nerve to put forward those guesses as actual knowledge in front of a man who was in the position of the lawyer. Yet Carlo did it—and almost convinced Regan by his facility.

“My cousin,” said Carlo, “had the idea of taking over these two planets from the Kaldori—though the actual race and the position of the worlds was not known to us—and using them for colonisation purposes outside the sphere of the terran government. In return for these planets there was to be a trading agreement with the Kaldori that would guarantee them a far better return than their previous unwieldy set-up. You must realise, Sarwadi, that a planet can only be successfully colonised by a race that can live in ecological harmony upon its surface without the need for the artificial trappings of its home world. That is why so many planets are useless to so many worlds. The cost of operating them on an economic basis is out of all proportion to the return which they achieve.

“That is why conflict between races is unnecessary when the only reasons for that conflict are the possession of worlds that cannot yield an economic return.”

“Quite so,” agreed Tecwyn. “And it was on such a basis that Plender worked for much of his life.”

“And that was the reason for his murder, you think?” asked Sarwadi.

Carlo leaned forward in his chair. “Plender had hit the jackpot, Sarwadi. A thing like this, on such a vast scale would set him up for life. It was the sort of eldorado that ancient explorers dreamed about, and Plender had it, right there in his hands. Yes, I think that was why he was murdered.”

“Then the people responsible for his death are those that now control the two Kaldori worlds?”

“It seems a reasonable hypothesis.”

Sarwadi sighed. "Then the chances of finding the actual person responsible are almost nil."

"Why do you say that?" asked Regan.

"Because they will have the backing of a vast organisation," snapped Sarwadi. "That organisation will be blameless—or, at best, too vast for us to fix the blame properly. Their agent will have been paid off, and may be anywhere in the Galaxy with no trail behind him that we might follow."

Only now, as the silence followed Sarwadi's pronouncement, did Regan feel the excitement stir within him. Only hours before the trail had been cold and dead, the chances that it would open before them had been remote in the extreme. Now it was open, a broad, straight road with mist only at the very end of it. So many pieces had fallen into place that the picture was almost complete and now Regan could see the whole of the great canvas that Manuel Cabrera had been working on.

Two new worlds with conditions that were terran and an ecology that would support a terran population. Ready built installations that might, in detail, be alien, but which, in particular, could easily be converted for human habitation. Manuel had seen the picture early on and had worked towards it secretly, and with the vast resources of the family Cabrera at the back of him. It would have solved all the problems of Earth at one swoop as population by the million could have been lifted from the parent world and sent across the light years to the two Kaldori worlds. An agreement with the terran government was all that would be needed; the city state would have been broken by a strict control of population by laws that were already in force, and by the great outflow of colonists over the years to come.

Regan couldn't even guess at the timetable which would be necessary to fulfil such a vast project, but with the large resources of Earth behind it, then millions of people a year could be sent to the new worlds; great areas of the city state would be depopulated, the buildings torn down, and the open lands restored. In five years the balance would begin to swing the other way; in ten, fifteen, twenty years, there would be three planets carrying the population now borne by one. And at the back of that dream the family Cabrera—with Manuel at its head—would have ridden to power undreamed of by previous generations.

The magnitude of the vision behind the plan awed Regan as he sat and considered it; and, as he considered it, the reasons for Manuel's secrecy were made equally clear. Earth would cease to be greedy, her needs would diminish, the picture of the grasping terran, raping the resources of the colony worlds would be killed, the tension and the hatred between the home world and the colony planets would be a thing of the past.

No wonder someone wanted to kill the idea before it took hold.

Regan felt suddenly cold even though the office was warmed by the sunlight that streamed through the window. If the plan went through, then the reasons for conflict would be gone—the ripe plum of Earth would not fall into the hands of the waiting colony worlds, for the cause of terran demands would be removed; without those demands no one could stoke up the enmity that was necessary if the fires of conflict were to be brightened into the redness of danger.

Regan looked across at Carlo, and the grim expression on the black man's face told him that the self-same thoughts had crystallised within his mind also.

"Well, gentlemen?" asked Sarwadi, breaking the silence. "I have learned the reasons for the murder of Arfon Plender, and perhaps I may even be able to use them for clearing this file. Which leaves only one problem!"

"And what is that?" asked Regan.

Sarwadi chuckled. "That, I am happy to say, is not a question that I have to answer. The implications of what I have heard today are sufficiently large for me to realise that there are vast issues at stake, issues where the life of one man is not of very much importance." He looked sombrely at Regan and Carlo. "The problem I mentioned is in your hands, gentlemen, though what it is I cannot guess. The answer, too, is in your hands, and there again," he shook his head sadly, "I do not even begin to know what it is."

Carlo rose to his feet and Regan followed suit.

"There is one favour I would ask of you," said the black man.

Sarwadi spread wide his hands. "If it is within my power."

"Just how effectively can you control the communications link between Cleomon and other planets?"

Sarwadi considered the question for a moment, his eyes dark and appraising, then he replied, "If it will make you happier, I can promise you that there will be no contact

between Cleomon and the outside Galaxy that might have to do with the Kaldori and their system."

Carlo smiled and bowed slightly. "Thank you, Sarwadi. That is all we wished to know."

"Do I need to ask where you are going?"

Carlo glanced at Regan, and then returned the police officer's slight smile. "No," he replied. "No, Sarwadi, I don't think you need."

t w e n t y - t h r e e

Alpha Regis was the brightest light in the heavens from the control bridge of the Cabrera vessel. It was a light that had been pointed out to Regan by Lahaye as they headed out from Cleomon, and it had grown steadily stronger and brighter during the whole five days of their leap across space.

Around them the great arm of the Galaxy swirled and glistened; and, since Alpha Regis was a Rim star, the blazing fire of the universe thickened and glowed away to the port side of the ship, while to starboard the stars were thin spread, each one gleaming in apparent solitude.

As he gazed upon the glowing ember that was their destination, Regan felt the all too familiar tingle of excitement grow within him. It was a sensation that he had not known until six weeks earlier, but it was a sensation that had become so much a part of him that he wondered how he had lived for so many years without it. Back in the pseudo-hospital on Ferroval a new mind had been created as well as a new body, and he realised that he had risen like a phoenix from the pyre of the exploding ship.

"What are you thinking, cousin?" Carlo's voice stirred him from his dreams, and Regan nodded briefly towards the golden marble of Alpha Regis.

"I am thinking of another ship and another time, of a circumstance that saved my life—mine alone of all others aboard the Ferroval cruiser."

"That—and more no doubt."

Regan laughed harshly, and pointed to the star that lay ahead. "There may lie my destiny, Carlo. Perhaps, soon, I shall know why I was spared. The old man believes in God and fate, and there are moments when I think he may be right. This is one of them."

They stood together in silence while the ship hummed and moved around them. Quadros, Lahaye and several others worked in muted voices, each of them showing the eagerness that had been generated by the precipitous departure from Cleomon. None of them knew the purpose of the journey, but all of them sensed the tension within Regan as well as the more easy anticipation of Carlo.

And Regan knew just how much he owed to the black man.

On Cleomon he had accomplished more in a few hours than Regan could have done in a week, and he had done it because of the inbred sureness and dynamic resolution that came only with a lifetime of observation and training. Old Cabrera had spoken of the secrecy, the treachery, the double dealing that had, for centuries, ruled the lives of the family Cabrera, and Regan had sense enough to know that Carlo was a product of just such a system. Carlo, like Regan, had been tempered in the fires of reality, but in the case of the black man, that tempering had been longer and deeper, with results that showed themselves under such conditions as they had encountered on Cleomon. Carlo had thought of everything, and by his actions had told Regan that this was his world—the scene in which he was the main character, while Regan was merely a bystander, hanging on to his coat tails, and drawn inexorably into the whirlpool of his progress.

There had been long conferences with Tecwyn during which the papers of the dead Plender had been sifted and studied, to be drained of all the content that would be useful to them. In those papers had been information that was invaluable—so invaluable that Regan had thought callously how little they needed the living presence of Arfon Plender. Carlo had made diplomatically sure that Sarwadi had implemented his promise of strict security; Carlo had galvanised Quadros and Lahaye into producing flight plans for Alpha Regis; Carlo had dominated the whole twenty-four hours following the conference in Sarwadi's office; Carlo! Regan wondered just how far he would have got without the black man at his side.

And even as he thought of it Carlo shattered the illusion by asking, "What are your intentions now, cousin?"

Regan smiled and glanced sideways at the black man. "I think that we will head for the second and third planets," he replied. "The Kaldori are not concerned in this matter. It would only confuse the issue to involve them unnecessarily."

"I agree," nodded Carlo. "And when we reach the two worlds—what then, cousin?"

Regan's smile turned to ice. "I told you once that I was playing this whole business by ear. I think I'll go on that way."

"Have you considered the consequences? Have you thought that you may be heading straight for trouble?"

"Yes, but I see no alternative."

"Return to Earth. Inform the family. Enlist the whole resources of our empire."

Regan shook his head. "No, Carlo. It would be too late. At the moment we have the advantage of surprise, and that is not a card that I will deliver easily." He looked across the control bridge to the hunched figures of Quadros and Lahaye. "Quadros, how far from the third planet are we?"

"Just over three hours flight, senior. You can see it as a point of light some ten degrees to the left of the sun."

"Then let that be our destination." Regan turned back to Carlo. "I shall be in my cabin, cousin, there is little we can do here, and I wish to rest before we make planetfall."

"Then I will stay and admire the view," Carlo smiled.

Regan left the bridge and made his way back along the wide, metal corridors to the more luxurious quarters amidships. He felt that he needed to be alone, to think, to consider. Ahead of him, he knew, lay the climax to all that had begun over two years ago—a climax that had been as inexorable as death. And yet he felt no elation; rather there was a dull, nagging question what would he do once it was over? He had lived for years in a vacuum of inactivity, and that vacuum lay ahead once more, just out of sight, hidden by the misty confusion of the present and of the immediate future.

He lay down on the bed and shielded his eyes so that darkness shrouded him. There was peace here, disturbed only by the muted life of the great ship. He thought of the old man and wondered what he was doing, where he was, how he had reacted to the sudden disappearance of the ship on its route to Ferroval. He thought of Giselle and her violet eyes; of Armand with his blonde hair and pasty face; of Pedro and Simon; of the dead, bloated form of Malatest; of Plender whom he had never known, yet who had held the key which might unlock the door.

Most of all he thought of Manuel Cabrera, who lived on because of him.

Beside the bed the intercom unit buzzed its urgent note, and he reached out with one prosthetic hand to press the control button.

"Cousin." Carlo's voice was clear and hard. "Come to the bridge—now."

Regan was awake in an instant. He left the cabin and headed back along the passages towards the nerve centre of the ship. As he entered the control centre Carlo turned away from the central viewport and beckoned to him.

"Here, cousin." He pointed out into the star strewn darkness. "See, there."

Regan stepped up beside him and looked out of the port, following with his eyes the pointing finger that Carlo aimed towards the starboard side. For a moment he could see nothing. He allowed his eyes to take in more light, and he removed the dark glasses—and it was then that he saw it. Another ship, black against the stars, yet with flecks of light where the viewport sent their gleaming fingers into the darkness. Regan's stomach turned over as he saw it.

"Carlo, what—?"

"Our rendezvous, cousin."

Regan's throat was dry as he saw the slight, wistful smile that twisted the black lips. He looked for aid to Quadros, but the captain was busy on the far side of the bridge with Lahaye and several others.

"Rendezvous? Carlo, what nonsense is this?"

The black man laughed. "Cousin," he said softly, "you are too naive for your own good. Did you really think that I would have allowed you to come here from Cleomon without taking some precautions?"

Regan said nothing, his bewilderment was too great.

"The instant we made planetfall on Cleomon the information was passed to Xanadu. It would have been the same wherever and whenever we appeared, for the fingers of the family Cabrera are widespread, cousin. We were almost six days on Cleomon, and that would give my uncle—your father—a good chance of making up time on us." Carlo laid a hand apologetically on Regan's shoulder. "Before we left I arranged with Sarwadi—on your orders—for a rendezvous to be arranged and a message to be passed to old Cabrera telling him of our plans. The fact that our route from Cleomon to the Kaldori sun lay back upon the route to Earth—albeit at an

angle—meant that any ships from Earth would reach Kaldori ahead of us. Cousin, my deception troubles me.” He cocked a wicked eye at Regan. “But I think we may be glad of those two ships ere this day is over.”

“Two ships?”

Carlo nodded. “Look there—to the other side.”

And as he did so Regan saw another—a mirror image of the one to starboard.

“Do I have your forgiveness, cousin?”

Regan turned from the viewport, and, strangely, he found the thought of those other vessels comforting. He grinned. “Yes, I grant you forgiveness. Have you spoken with—with my father?”

“The old one is sleeping. I would not disturb him.”

“Then I, too, will sleep. Call me when it is time.”

Regan went back to his cabin; he needed time to think and to thank whatever fates had caused Carlo to doubt his motives in the first place. Without the presence of the black man he would have blundered from error to error with results that were all too clear and all too unpleasant to contemplate. As he looked back on the confusion of that last day on Cleomon he could see just how Carlo had accomplished his deception during those hectic hours when he had taken the initiative away from Regan; everything had been handled that needed to be handled with a sureness and a precision that had drawn Regan’s admiration and relief.

Now, he could see why.

So much had happened—so much had needed to be done—that it had been easy for Carlo to make the arrangements he had spoken of, and Sarwadi would not have questioned the orders because it was Carlo who had acted as an equal partner; it was Carlo who had spoken of a communication blanket; it was Carlo who had questioned Tecwyn; and it was the black man who had foreseen the dangers of the unannounced arrival of a single ship within the Kaldori system.

Regan offered a prayer for the presence of Carlo—and then he slept.

twenty - four

He was awakened by Carlo's knock on the door of his cabin, and the black man entered at his summons.

"We are arrived, cousin."

"No trouble?" Regan asked.

"None to speak of. We were challenged by two ships as we made our approach, but Quadros had a cover story ready to shield us, and we have been allowed to proceed."

"Allowed?"

Carlo smiled wryly. "Ordered, then."

"And what now?"

"We shall land in a tender. Co-ordinates have been given for the point at which we are to arrive."

"What of the old man?"

"He stays aboard his own ship," said Carlo. "I told him that we insisted on it as a safety measure. Three ships with him in charge could be a guarantee of our safety."

Regan nodded in agreement.

"He will land later, should he deem it necessary."

Regan sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the carpeted floor between his feet. "It is too quiet," he said. "I have a feeling, Carlo, that I cannot explain. I would have expected trouble."

"Why should there be? No one knows our true identity."

"I don't know. These worlds are waiting here for colonists from Earth, and they have been waiting for two years and more. They are the answer to all the problems that lie on Earth—and someone has taken possession of them."

He looked up at Carlo.

"Who, cousin?" The word came automatically to his lips. "Only Manuel knew about them—he and Plender and Tecwyn—"

"And one other," added Carlo. "I have thought about it, too. I have no answer save that the colony worlds do not know what is planned or they would have taken control of the Kaldori worlds for themselves. Yet, as we see, they are not here."

"Then who is," snarled Regan. "Who is here to greet us with ships and men? Who has kept your cousin's secret so close these past years?"

"The tender is waiting for us," Carlo told him, gently. "Perhaps, within the hour, we shall have the answer."

The tender swung away from the ship and headed down low over the surface of the planet, and from it Regan and Carlo could see how much like Earth was the world below them. Those first far glimpses from the control bridge of the ship were but heralds of the beauty that was to come. It was Xanadu again, but larger and greener—more beautiful because of its sheer size and splendour as it rose to greet them. There were wide rivers, high peaks and vast, green plains; there were rain clouds scudding grey beneath blue acres of sky; there was storm and hurricane, wind and rain, snow at the poles and blistering heat at the equator.

All this and more that was necessary to the heart and soul of man if he was to be happy. And here, thought Regan, could be the rebirth of that other world so far away in space yet so close in time; here could be brought the teeming millions that were suffocating on their native world—and they would come happily to a world that was so much like their own that it might have been a twin. But the twin was as Earth had been, as Earth should be, and could be in the future; it was a world to play upon the heart strings of any man who saw it, especially if that man had known the spawning horror of the city state.

As they headed for the position that had been given them, they could see, gleaming in the brilliant sun, small signs of habitation—a town here, and industrial installation there; the buildings were not shielded as the papers that Tecwyn had showed them, had indicated.

"Someone has been busy, cousin," remarked Carlo, as they swept low over a small, geometrically designed town. "The Kaldori needed shielded cities, and these are open—and see, there," he pointed away to the left where the regular lines of cultivation showed the multi colours of large fields. "I would guess that this world could take many millions of colonists at this moment."

"But who—?"

"Patience, cousin. I cannot begin to guess, but someone has taken Manuel's plan and is using it for a very different reason. It was too big to be thrown away entirely."

"Carlo," said Regan. "I am thinking—there is another world like this. Can you imagine what Earth would be like in a few years?"

"If Earth had the benefit of all that we can see." Carlo nodded. "Yes, I can imagine."

Regan was silent. He looked down on the panorama that swept below the fast moving tender, and wondered what he could do. The ships that had greeted them had bespoken the power that was held by those who opposed him—a power which he should not have assailed alone ; and, thanks to Carlo, they were not alone. But the power was still there, tangible and threatening. He recalled Carlo's warning, 'Return to Earth. Inform the family. Enlist the resources of our empire.' But no, he had been too eager, too ready to trust his own instinct rather than the greater experience of the black man, and only Carlo's foresight had staved off complete disaster. Now, at least, they had a chance.

A small, grey landing area showed ahead and to the right, and beyond it a wide, low area of buildings—one and two storied—marked the largest area of habitation that they had yet seen. A river wound its blue-green way towards a lake that glistened in the distance, and mountains loomed dark in the background. The landing field came up to meet them—they set down gently and easily—the motors whispered to silence, and from the buildings at the edge of the field two small ground vehicles sped out towards them.

"The spider has an effective web," commented Carlo.

"Let us hope it is not so effective as it might seem," replied Regan. "Come, let us meet our hosts."

There was small comfort in knowing that the men who greeted them were terran. They were young, and they had a healthy, outdoor look that was not common on Earth. Regan recognised it for what it was, he had seen it on Caledon and Cleomon, on Ferroval and the other colony worlds, but on Earth—never. These men had been on the Kaldori worlds for some considerable time.

They were polite in their greetings, but there was an attitude about them that indicated their underlying hostility. Strangers were not welcome, and that fact was made abundantly clear. Regan recognised the insistence behind their request that he and Carlo should take their places in the rear of one of the ground vehicles, and he gave no sign that he was unwilling. They were whisked away from the landing field and out on to the wide road that led into the nearby town. The buildings that they saw were unmistakably alien in origin, but they had been adapted by their new occupants, and there were, here and

there, evidences of new buildings in the familiar lines of terran architecture.

"You have adapted yourselves well, gentlemen," said Regan to the two men who rode in the front of the vehicle.

The man beside the driver turned and smiled thinly back at him. "We have had plenty of time and many resources. Do you like our efforts?"

"Indeed I do. There will be room here for many millions of people." Regan gazed unconcernedly out of the car as he said it.

"Perhaps." The word was allowed to slip out reluctantly as the young man's eyes narrowed slightly.

Regan could almost see the wheels turning within his mind, but he said no more and turned back to look along the road that lay ahead.

They followed the route as it passed through the town and out into the countryside again. And as the buildings fell away behind them and the green fields opened out on either side, Regan could see their final destination. It was a house built low and large upon a slight crest so that it overlooked the surrounding land. The road ran beyond and disappeared over another rise away in the distance. In the sunlight the house gleamed white with the black holes of windows and doors to give it eyes. In the front a wide, smooth drive led away from the road and up to the main entrance, and as the vehicle pulled to a halt before the great arched doorway the young man asked, "Who may I have the pleasure of announcing, gentlemen?"

Regan looked at Carlo and smiled. "Perhaps our own introductions will be better received."

"As you wish." The man shrugged his indifference.

They walked up the three steps to the entrance, and inside the house was cool and white and airy. There was a wood block floor on which their feet echoed as the guide led them through the house and out into the sunlight again, into a wide, flower decked garden.

A man knelt on the lawn with his back towards them, tending a bush that blazed in scarlet beauty under the blue sky, and the young man crossed to him, and said, "These are the visitors who have landed from the ships."

"Good. Bid them welcome."

Regan and Carlo crossed the lawn as the young man beckoned to them, and as they approached the kneeling figure he rose and turned to greet them. He was a youngish man—in his early forties—dark faced, with clear grey eyes and a piercing hawk-like face that gleamed with sweat. His clothing was old and dusty, and it did nothing to indicate that here was the man who ruled two worlds—the man who had destroyed the Ferroval cruiser, who had usurped the position of Manuel Cabrera, killed Arfon Plender ; the man who had so disturbed the life of Martin Regan that it would never be the same again.

Beside him Carlo stopped and let out his breath in a long sigh, then he said, slowly and with a cold detachment, "I had thought about it—but I did not believe, truly, that it might be so. My greetings to you, cousin Manuel."

twenty-five

The sun of Alpha Regis burned upon Regan's head. It was the one concrete thing on to which he could latch in a world that had suddenly exploded around him. Vaguely, he knew that he should be feeling all the emotions that had been pent up within him for so long, yet all he was aware of was a cold wonder that he had not considered the possibility earlier. At one stroke, above the mental numbness that he felt, all questions were answered ; each and every portion of the great panorama fell into perspective with a clarity that was blinding in its simplicity.

The man on the Ferroval cruiser had been a decoy, and his death had covered the tracks of Manuel Cabrera with a thoroughness that no other stratagem would have achieved. At one stroke Manuel had protected himself and his plans ; and with that stroke he had brought grief to his parents, and bewilderment and pain into the life of an innocent trading agent named Martin Regan.

Regan lifted his prosthetic hands and held them before his face. They were covered from wrist to shoulder, and only he knew of the horror that lay beneath the covering, the pain that had given them birth.

He looked up at the hawk face of Manuel Cabrera and saw the alarm and the surprise written there. The grey eyes were stark and wide, and they bore the look of a man who has

suffered an almost psychic shock. Yet even as he looked into them Regan could see the bewilderment fade as Manuel Cabrera fought to regain his self control. The lines of his face settled into grim acceptance of an unpleasant fact as he said, "Had I but known that it was you, cousin!"

"And I—if I had guessed—" Carlo let the words hang in the air, and the silence that followed dragged, it seemed, into hours.

The grey eyes studied Regan, taking in details of his being, and, as in a dream, he heard Manuel say, "I have heard of you, Regan. My reports from the outside universe told me of your masquerade. Oh, yes." He nodded at Regan's obvious surprise. "Oh, yes, I know of the error of identification that placed you in my shoes. It was a happy circumstance at the time, yet now I begin to doubt it."

"Then if it wasn't you aboard the ship—" breathed Carlo.

"Does it matter who took his place?" rasped Regan. "The man is dead, and death was the price of his loyalty. What of the carrier, Manuel? The box that caused us so much trouble and concern."

Manuel laughed gently. "I do not know what was in it, but whatever it was would have been of no use to anyone. It was the final happy circumstance that made my escape here—to Kaldori—so free of trouble." He wiped a hand across his moist brow. "Come, let us sit in the shade. We have much to talk on." He took Carlo by the elbow, linking arms as relatives do who are close to one another, but Regan saw the look on Carlo's face as the couple moved away, and he followed them more slowly, still in a daze of surprise and apprehension.

Manuel led them to a rough wooden seat set under a tree with wide-spread arms and large green leaves. There was a table with a jug of liquid and several glasses that glistened as the sunlight played upon them.

"Please, sit down." Manuel waved them to the bench. "It is hot working in this sun, yet I think a drink will be as welcome to you as it will be to me."

And still Carlo kept silent as the glasses were filled with a long, cool drink of some sweet fruit juice that was unfamiliar to Regan.

"Remember how I always wanted a garden, cousin?" asked Manuel.

"Yes, I remember," replied Carlo, huskily. "You had all of Xanadu for your garden. Wasn't that enough?"

"Was Xanadu enough for you, Regan?" asked Manuel, his grey eyes mockingly upon Regan's scarred face.

"It was all that I ever could have wished for."

"Then you are a fool. Once I saw this world I knew what I wanted—"

"You had it at Xanadu," snapped Carlo bitterly.

"No." Manuel's voice was soft but his manner was grim.

"No, Xanadu belonged to the family—to my father and to Giselle, to you and to Pedro, to Simon and all the other Cabrerases. It was never mine—I had only a small part of it, and it was never enough."

"Did you have to be so cruel?" asked Carlo. "Did you have to weigh down the hearts of your parents with so much anguish? Do you know the grief you caused, the worry—"

"It was unavoidable," broke in Manuel. "You know as well as I the difficulties, the trouble I had. The representatives of the colony worlds did their utmost to find what I was about. Thanks to Regan and the happy circumstance that allowed his survival with my supposed belongings the way was made easier for me."

"All you had to do was to confide in us."

"That was all." Manuel sneered. "Confide in the family and hand over all this?" He shook his head. "No, Carlo. This plan is mine, the efforts behind it are mine, and the fruits of its success will be mine. If the family had joined me, how much of it do you think would have been left to me?"

"It belongs to Mankind."

The quick exchanges had given Regan time to recover, and now there was a question burning within his brain to which he already knew the answer, yet it was a question that still had to be asked because the answer was too terrible to contemplate without complete confirmation.

"The Ferroval cruiser," Regan said. "You were responsible for its destruction?"

The question was greeted with a deathly silence; Carlo turned his head slowly and looked at Regan from eyes that were stark with denial and horror. "Regan! No—"

"Yes, Carlo, I think the answer is yes. Look at his eyes and tell me that you can deny it." Regan turned his gaze back to Manuel. "Did you—arrange it?"

"What would you have me say, Regan? What would you have me do? This whole thing is greater than any one person or group of people—"

"Sixty-eight people died on that ship," Regan whipped off the dark glasses to reveal the bulging orbs of his alien eyes. "And I have wished many times in the dark of the night that I had been the sixty-ninth. There is no justification in all the universe—"

"Who are you to talk of justification," rasped Manuel. "You are a little man who has strayed into something that is too vast for your comprehension. Can't you understand that I had to vanish utterly and completely? Can't you understand that my supposed death was the only way by which I could pursue the goal which I was seeking? Only one person in the whole Galaxy knew where I was—"

"Plender." Carlo's voice was dead of all emotion. "Plender—and you killed him too."

"You knew of Plender?" Manuel looked at them in surprise.

"How else do you think we trailed you here?"

"It was a question I had intended to ask." Manuel chuckled. "So—my little Giselle remembered all too well. And for that one brief moment of weakness—ah, well! It is too late for regrets."

"Giselle?" Carlo turned on Regan. "It was Giselle who told you."

Manuel laughed outright. "So! She would trust a stranger and yet she would not trust one of the family. Carlo, I think our friend has some attraction that is lost to us." The smile vanished. "And yet, with Plender dead—"

"You should have killed again," snapped Regan. "Or did it not occur to you that Plender might have left records?"

"His house was completely destroyed."

"But not his friends—"

"He had none. He was a lone wolf with no other God but money."

"There was one," said Regan. "One man of whom we learned."

"I wondered—"

"You wondered. God in heaven." Carlo rose to his feet and lifted his arms to the sky. "Is life so cheap to you, cousin?"

"Sit down, Carlo. You wear your emotions too gaudily." Manuel drained his glass and set it on the table. "Regan, can you not see the dream I have? Can you not see how great is the plan that I have created?"

"I see only dead men," retorted Regan, "and I see them through alien eyes, and I touch them with false hands. No, I do not see." He rose to his feet and stood beside the black man. "Come Carlo. We have been here too long for any good that we might do."

"Do you think that you shall leave here, now, Regan? With Plender in his grave, and those others lost on the Ferroval cruiser?"

"There are three ships up there. He wouldn't dare—"

"Indeed he would. Tell him, cousin."

Manuel gestured briefly and smiled at them. "I have to think on this matter, cousin. Three ships are a strong force. In the meantime, consider yourselves my guests. This is a lovely world—as lovely as Earth once was—enjoy it and watch it blossom."

For Regan the next hours passed in a realm that bordered on the fantastic. By almost tacit consent the conversation veered away from controversial subjects, and Manuel Cabrera presented another side to his character that was very different from the picture which Regan had built up. He escorted them around his vast garden, proudly showing them his flowers and bushes, and explaining in great detail the science of horticulture. In the warm sun and under the blue sky the tension lifted and Regan relaxed. He savoured the brilliant colours and the exquisite perfumes, and he found an unexpected gentleness in his prosthetic hands as he held in them the fragrant blooms offered by his host.

Only briefly did he wonder about the old man waiting in his ship.

The sun declined and the hours passed, and the shadows lengthened across the green lawns. Their tour ended back at the wooden seat, and Manuel offered them further drinks from the large jug. As he did so a man came from the house and crossed towards them. Manuel moved away from them and listened intently as the man whispered in his ear.

"Cousin." He turned away from the messenger. "You will excuse me. I have urgent business to attend to. Please, enjoy my garden while I am gone."

Regan watched sombrely as the slim figure vanished inside the house, then he said, "I do not like what I hear, Carlo."

"And have you heard as much as I?" Something in the black man's tone made Regan look at him sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"I know Manuel and you do not. I knew him during all of our previous life together. I knew him then and I know him now."

"Well?"

"He has had six years, Regan. Four years before he found it necessary to disappear, and a further two years since. He has had at the back of him all the resources that he amassed during his former life, and added to them are the resources of two planets. There are thousands of men from Earth working here; there are towns and cities, and factories and farms and mines. There are two almost virgin worlds waiting for a flood of immigrants which each of them can easily absorb." Carlo looked at Regan from cold, bleak eyes. "And yet he does nothing save guard his secrets and cover his tracks. He does nothing save maintain a veil of silence and secrecy that it has taken blind luck and a great deal of valuable time to uncover."

Regan sat down again on the bench. At the back of his mind there stirred something of the dread apprehension that had moved Carlo's voice to urgency.

"Do you not see it, Regan?" Carlo insisted. "At the back of him is only murder and death and intrigue. Manuel is a master of intrigue—he learned well from his father, but he has not the old man's compassion and belief in his fellow men. He is cold and calculating and—as you have heard—human life means little to him beyond the over-riding necessity to remove anyone who threatens his dream."

Regan said nothing.

"He should be out in the open by now. He could be gaining the support of the Terran Central government. If he acted now, then the threat that hangs over the Galaxy will be removed in a few months. The flow of immigrants could begin in ten years—five years even—the whole structure of human inter-relationships could be changed beyond recognition. In twenty years the green spaces would begin to be seen on Earth, the city state would begin to die, the demands by Earth on the colony worlds would diminish and the causes

of the tension would be removed." Carlo turned and looked at the doorway through which Manuel had passed so recently. "And yet he waits. Why, Regan? Why?"

While Carlo spoke Regan allowed his thoughts to run ahead of the black man's words. He looked around the brilliant garden and he remembered Xanadu. He thought of Manuel's love for this garden and the things that grew in it, and he remembered the dead aboard the Ferroval cruiser. His eyes saw the flame-red beauty of a burning bush, and his mind thought of the flowering horror of fire that had devoured the body and the home of Arfon Plender. In one man lay the love of beauty and a callousness of death that was at once both horrible and fascinating. The family meant more to Regan than it did to Manuel Cabrera—and in that fact lay the answer to the questions that Carlo was asking.

"I think, Carlo," said Regan, "that your cousin is waiting on the death of the Galaxy."

"What?"

Regan gestured wearily. "He doesn't want to end the conflict or reduce the tension. He wants the destruction of Earth and of the colony worlds as effective economic units, and the way in which that can be done is to sit aside and watch them tear at each others throats. And when it is over he will be the one power within the Galaxy that has been untouched by force; he will be the one person with an organisation capable of rebuilding from the chaos that will be left."

Carlo stood shaking his head in a desperate mute denial of the words that assailed his ears. "You must be wrong."

"Am I? Can there be any other reason for his secrecy? Manuel hated Xanadu because it was not his. He hated the family for denying him the power that he desired—Carlo," Regan leaned urgently forward, "his every word confirms that what you attempt to deny must be so. There is too vast a picture spread over too long a time, and if you see all of that picture you must see what lies in the background."

"It could never happen," whispered Carlo. "If such a conflagration comes it will be too wide-spread for even these worlds to survive."

"There are few that know of them—"

"Yet there are some, and the Kaldori are not unknown to the colony worlds."

"Exactly," snapped Regan. "They are Kaldori worlds, and the Kaldori would not allow an outside conflict to threaten their system. And Manuel knows it."

Carlo sat down heavily on the seat.

"No alien race would allow it," insisted Regan. "Whatever happens on Earth or on the colony worlds—whatever destruction takes place—these two planets will be under the nominal protection of an alien race who cares nothing for Terran motives and desires. The Kaldori are interested only in the economic advantages to be gained by the presence within their system of an alien race. And so long as Manuel and his followers stick to their side of the bargain then they will be safe."

Above them the blue sky had taken the first faint purple tints of dusk. Carlo put his face in his hands and rested his elbows on his knees in an attitude of utter dejection.

"You must be right," he whispered after a long pause. "I know you must be right for there can be no other answer."

From the house the slim figure of Manuel emerged and crossed towards them. His face was cold and serious as he approached them, and Regan wondered what could have happened to so change him from the pleasant companion of bare minutes before.

"What game are you playing, cousin?" he demanded of Carlo who looked up at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" snapped Regan.

Manuel's eyes were cold as he said, "Another tender has landed from one of your ships. Its occupants are already on their way to this house."

twenty-six

Regan looked grimly at Carlo and read the alarm in the other's face.

"Well?" demanded Manuel.

"I don't know, cousin," replied Carlo slowly. "No one should have followed us."

Yet Regan knew that within his mind there burned the same question that burned in Carlo's. What was the old man doing? Why had he come? And in Carlo's eyes he could read the same questions. Had the old man become too

impatient with the silence of Regan and Carlo, and, with dusk drawing across the place where they had landed, had he decided to come and see for himself what lay on the surface of the world below the ship?

"I am waiting for an answer," rasped Manuel.

"Then you will get none from us," replied Regan, "for we don't know the answer that you are seeking."

From the house the same servant who had come before hurried towards Manuel.

"There are visitors arrived from the spacefield."

"So soon? Manuel's eyes glinted with sudden anger as he turned on Carlo. "It seems my questions will be answered without your aid cousin."

To the servant he said, "Bring them through to the garden."

The seconds ticked away in silence as Manuel paced a few impatient yards across the rich grass and Carlo sat, stiff-backed, his face a mask on which no emotions were written. Regan felt numbed, first by the realisation that he had foreseen the ambitions and the desires of Manuel Cabrera, and second by the conflict that he knew must come from the presence on the planet of old Cabrera. He wondered desperately what lay ahead of them, what the next few hours of time would bring forth, and the desperation faded into dull acceptance as he knew that there was nothing he could do—no single act that he could perform—that would prevent the onward march of events which had begun so long ago.

He knew that only here, now, in the next short period of time, there lay the climax to all that he had endured.

From the black doorway figures appeared. The servant at the head of the small group stood aside and waved the rest of the party through. Cabrera stood, hunched and old, his grey, old fashioned clothes drab and unbecoming in the bright garden. His right hand leaned heavily on his stick, and his left—Regan's heart jumped—his left hand held the arm of Giselle. Behind them the tall, lean figure of Armand stood, his blonde hair a gleam in the last rays of the lowering sun.

Slowly, they came down the steps and on to the lawn, and Regan heard Manuel curse softly and unintelligibly behind him. Bare yards separated them when Giselle stopped dead in her tracks and her left hand flew to her mouth in sudden

horror and surprise, and Regan knew that she had recognised Manuel.

He crossed to the old man, trying to keep himself between Manuel and the group, aware that such a shock as this could have disastrous consequences.

"Cabrera," he greeted him, his eyes boring into the old, brown, wrinkled face and drawing the gaze of the old man towards him. "We are ill met. You should have stayed aboard and waited for us to come to you."

"I have waited too long, Regan," said the old man softly. "My time is running out—and so is the time for all Mankind. I had to come."

Clearly, he had not noticed Manuel, and Regan glanced hurriedly at Giselle standing stark and white beside her father. He read in her eyes the fear that he himself had felt, that the shock could kill the old man.

"I have news for you, Cabrera," Regan said slowly. "It may be that it will shock you, and I ask you to brace yourself for it."

The old eyes narrowed, searching his face for some sign and Cabrera said, "I am beyond shock, Regan. I have lived too long to be surprised by what I hear or what I see."

"So be it." Regan stood aside and allowed the slim figure of Manuel to stand in clear view.

The silence grew and settled upon them. Cabrera looked and saw and stood as a stone statue, making no move nor showing any sign. Regan wondered if he would fall down and he noticed that Giselle had tightened her grip upon the old man's arm. Then, slowly and with no word spoken, the old man walked forward, his step firm upon the soft grass and his stick planted solidly to aid his movements. He crossed to the seat from which Carlo had risen, and disengaged his arm from Giselle's grasp so that he could seat himself. He rested his hands across the top of the cane and sat upright, his legs slightly apart.

"Father!" The first sound in long seconds was a whisper from Manuel.

"Who is this man?" demanded Cabrera. "He speaks to me as if we claim acquaintance."

For an instant Regan thought that the old man's mind had cracked under the sudden shock, but his voice was too firm and

his words too bitter for there to be any doubt of what he had said. Regan felt a sudden elation, for, in those few words the old man had shattered any illusions that any of them might have had for the future. He looked at Carlo and read the amazement in the black man's eyes ; he saw the tears shining on the cheeks of Giselle ; he noted the grim anger on the face of Armand, and the stark bewilderment of Manuel.

"Father, it is I, Manuel."

"Regan," snapped the old man. "Regan, tell me of this man—what has he done—what is he doing here, on the Kaldori worlds."

"He is a man with a dream, Cabrera," said Regan coldly. "He has a dream of an empire with himself at its head, and he will realise that dream over the broken worlds of Earth and Caledon and Cleomon, of Ferroval and Cabri. There are dead men behind him, Cabrera, and dead men form the road ahead—if he is allowed to go on."

"Father !" The dark eyes blazed their malevolence at Regan.

"Tell him," said Regan coldly. "Tell him of your plan to hide here and await the dissolution of Mankind. Tell him how you hid yourself even from your own people. There are dead men to be paid for, and broken lives ; there is the grief of your family to be assuaged and debts in plenty to be redeemed. This is the moment of redemption Manuel, and I need to see you crawl."

"There is no truth in you," snarled Manuel.

"Murderer," said Regan implacably. "Tell them of the dead men that have marked your passing, tell them of the Ferroval cruiser, deny me these hands and these scars. Deny the grief of your mother and your father—if you can."

The silence that followed his words stretched into aeons ; Regan looked at the old man and knew that he was holding himself together only by a tremendous effort of will. He knew that the old man's brain was fitting the pieces together, seeking motives here, placing facts there, in their proper order.

"Can you explain your lies and your deceit ?" The old voice was a whisper but the contempt it bore was plain for all of them to read. "Can you explain the two lost years, or those who died in the Ferroval cruiser ?"

Manuel took three faltering steps towards Regan. His ashen face and terrible eyes bespoke his state of mind more

clearly than any words could tell. He hesitated and then turned back to the old man.

"Father, I had a dream—a dream too great for you to understand. I hold it still, deep within me, and I want it to blossom here, on the Kaldori worlds. I want the sort of world here that Earth once was. Can you not see it, can you not understand it, and see why I have done what has to be done? Father—"

"No," snapped the old man. "I see only ambition, a lust for power that has been placed above human life." He leaned forward on the seat. "I landed for one reason—a reason that has not been told. Our time is running out. Regan—Carlo—what we have feared for so long has happened. I received word of an open breach between Earth and the Colony worlds. It has come sooner than we expected, and it has come because of demands upon the economy of the colony worlds by the terran government. They have taken fright over the situation that exists on Earth and have demanded that millions of colonists be taken from Earth and settled on the new worlds. They have demanded a long term programme of evacuation that will be spread over the next twenty years and will reduce Earth's population by at least twenty per cent in that time."

Regan stared bleakly at Carlo and read the horror in the man's eyes. He looked at Manuel and saw the gleam of hope in the grey eyes—and he knew that this was what Manuel had been waiting for, this was the culmination of his idea.

"The colony worlds have rejected the suggestion," said Cabrera.

"Then there could be war," whispered Carlo.

"There will be if the situation deteriorates any further."

"It won't," broke in Regan decisively. "The answer is here—on the Kaldori worlds. We will offer them to Earth on the basis of Manuel's original idea, and I think they will accept. Once that is accomplished then the reason for strife will be gone."

"What of the colony worlds?" asked Carlo. "They will see their own dreams of conquest frustrated."

"Earth is too strong," said the old man. "They would never dare to tackle her when she has had hope reborn. These worlds will mean life for millions and the rebirth of the entire terran economy. No," he shook his head, "I do not think—"

"You shall not do it," screamed Manuel. "These are my worlds, and this is my plan—"

"You are a dead man," said Regan coldly. "Manuel your time is here and now, and you will wish a thousand times that you had died in the destruction of that ship."

Even as he spoke, Manuel turned and threw himself at Regan. He screamed an animal howl of rage, and the momentary glimpse that Regan had of his face, contorted as it was with rage and fear, told him that Manuel had given up the fight. He was beaten and he knew it ; yet, in one last effort at revenge he dared to contest his strength with that of the man whose death he had so nearly accomplished.

Regan threw him off, and caught him again as he came in a second time ; he held him tightly in his prosthetic arms, tensing them against the maniacal struggles of a man half mad with rage and frustration. There was a sudden crack, and Manuel screamed with pain. Regan relaxed his grip slightly, and as he did so, Manuel shrieked, "Armand ! Armand, kill him !"

The shock of it flooded through Regan's whole being. His eyes jumped across the space that separated him from the blonde man standing beside Giselle, and he read the flowering hatred and panic written so clear upon the thin face. Armand ! And Manuel had called upon him for aid. The blazing rage on Armand's face answered any questions that he might have had. There had to be someone on Earth to tell Manuel of Regan's survival and of his subsequent masquerade ; there had to be someone to help him obtain his recruits—the men and women needed to populate the two Kaldori worlds ; there had to be an agent for all the hundred things that needed to be done that could not be done by Manuel.

It had to be Armand !

No wonder Armand had opposed his plan to go to Ferroval ; no wonder Armand had tried to trap Regan into leaving Xanadu to fall into the hands of Malatest—if the plans had come off then the agents of the colony worlds would have had the person of Manuel Cabrera in their hands—or so they would have believed—and the real Manuel would have been doubly safe.

And it had been Armand who had kept Manuel informed of all that had happened—all, that was, except the closeness of Regan. And that he could not do because he didn't know Regan's plans until after he had left Earth with the old man. He and Cabrera would have been in space when the news reached them of Regan's ultimate destination, and it would have been far too dangerous for him to have tried to warn his cousin of the threat that was developing.

Armand !

Regan felt a terrible rage flood through him ; he was vaguely aware of the struggling form of Manuel clutched tightly in his arms like a fly in a giant web ; he was vaguely aware that the man was screaming, a high, horrible sound that made a mockery of the beauty that was around them. And then the screaming stopped, and the struggling. Regan wondered stupidly why Manuel was so still ; he opened his arms and allowed the dead, crushed body of Manuel Cabrera to fall to the ground where it lay, twisted and crumpled, upon the green grass.

He looked at it, and realised with growing horror just what he had done. The frozen tableau of the old man, of Giselle, of Carlo, stood looking at him, and he spread wide his hands in a gesture of hopeless repentance.

"I—I am sorry—"

Someone sobbed close by, a high-pitched, bitter sound that had an edge of hysteria to it, and he thought at once that it was Giselle crying for her twice lost brother. But she stood still and straight as she had been, white and motionless with her great violet eyes fixed on him, unblinking—there was no hatred in them. Beside her the tall, hunched form of Armand stood and wailed and moaned in the hopelessness of discovery, a broken tool now that his cousin was no more.

"Cabrera." Regan felt the words stick in his throat. "Cabrera, I have robbed you of your son again."

The old man rose slowly to his feet, and crossed to him, leaning heavily on his stick ; his face was as grey as death, yet it bore no sign of sorrow to add to the thousand wrinkles of his aged face. He paused beside the broken body of Manuel and poked at it gently with his cane.

"This was not my son, Regan," he said. "No son of mine can bear my name and act as he has done." The old eyes lifted from the body and looked at Regan, and there were tears in them. "You are more my son than ever he could be, and these tears of mine are for your survival—not for his death. My son lives on in what you have suffered, in what you have accomplished. And this—this carrion who bore my name has paid his debt in full."

He turned from Regan and walked slowly and stiffly towards the house. Giselle took his arm as he passed by and together they moved from Regan's sight through the dark doorway. Behind them the tottering, weeping figure of Armand was ushered away by Carlo, and Regan was left alone in the garden, with the dusk closing silently around him.

Hysterically, he wondered how a brother and sister might marry, and he was still laughing, high and tearfully, when Giselle came out to fetch him.

Lan Wright

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Guest Editorial continued

Or he might write the publisher and demand footnotes, weighty parenthetical passages, and a glossary.

Exit the story and entertainment, enter the dreary pseudo-science fiction that gave up the ghost decades ago.

The magazine would lose a certain uniqueness, in that it would no longer help to bind together writers, editors and convinced readers who have a deep, abiding, interest in, and love of, science fiction, which the average reader will probably never possess.

Leaving aside the social satire label for the moment, I'd like to tilt at the campaign to make science fiction "popular." In its present form, it could never become popular.

It offers both too much and too little.

Science fiction offers too much in that it challenges, stimulates, prods, almost forces, the reader to think, despite himself. It edges his thoughts away from the barren flat-lands towards higher intellectual ground. He will rebel, and curse the name of science fiction.

I have always maintained that the regular reader of science fiction is, in most pursuits requiring a little mental agitation, light-years ahead of his mainstream/crime/western contemporary. He is more inquiring, more ready to attempt to understand and to assimilate new concepts. Change doesn't scare him. He welcomes it.

What science fiction doesn't offer (or, if it does, in Angstrom-sized doses) is Spillane-like violence, Greene-like maudlin religion, sex/strip-tease/animated foundation garment sagas—fill this one in yourself—and Waugh/Delaney-like homosexuality. It seems to be socially smart to have practitioners of the latter perversion littering modern novels.

If you like, science fiction is amoral to the point of unreality. It's true to say that it doesn't reflect the mores and morals of contemporary society. It ignores activities that are common knowledge to all. Television, the Sunday press, and many modern novels (and some not so modern reprints) have gone noisily hysterical over crime and vice, and no opportunity is lost to drag the whole sordid mess out for our questionable benefit. (One Scottish newspaper recently published a strip cartoon about a mass murderer, convicted and hanged for his crimes).

Science fiction ignores these "facts of life" to its everlasting credit. Writers and editors would be a poor lot indeed if they resorted to, and condoned the use of, themes from the gutter. There is surely much in man that is more worthy of writing about. In science fiction, man has stature, a maturity of sorts. He doesn't have to spend most of the story crawling his way out of a mire of vice.

Science fiction cannot, then, effectively satirize society, because (a), it reaches too small an audience, and (b), it considers beneath notice a lot of the aspects that need satirizing.

Before going on to discuss Arthur Sellings' plea for a tyros' magazine, I'll have a quick thrust at what I consider another fallacy; the importance laid on the need for a definition of the term "science fiction." Briefly, I think that discussion on this theme, while very enjoyable, is purely academic, with little, if any, practical application. We regulars all have our own individual definition. Just as stars in a stream superimpose their individual motions upon the general motion, we adhere to the same large picture, agreeing to differ only on details.

Supposing a definition was agreed on, it wouldn't attract any converts. Entertainment—and don't let's lose sight of the fact that science fiction must provide entertainment first, then message—doesn't need a definition. By trying to impose a definition on the prospective readers, we would succeed only in driving them away.

In passing, I record my agreement with John Rackham that all stories have a message. It's impossible to write a story without one, however trivial it may be. Chaplin's *City Lights*, or most of the O. Henry tales, are examples where the message (or the moral) is expertly woven into the fabric of the story, not merely tagged on like a button.

Arthur Sellings' suggestion about a tyros' magazine requires a close examination.

It should be under the editorial aegis of Nova Publications: that much is obvious. And with three magazines currently running, the Editor is already busy enough!

Writing is a hard game. When the subject is science fiction, it becomes very hard.

Starting a magazine of the type envisaged would be tantamount to granting a licence to hundreds of fledgling writers who have been unable to cut their teeth anywhere else, and most of whom would never publish anything in any field.

A story must contain the basic ingredients no matter what market it is aimed at. Current *New Worlds Science Fiction* writers had to learn to write the hard way: by submitting material against the competition of the established writers. We started on the trash pile and fought our way up by producing professional stories, by taking excellent editorial advice, and by being determined to match up to the opposition. We made it, or we wouldn't be writing guest editorials!

Let newcomers do the same, proving, incidentally, that they are interested in science fiction for its own sake, and not merely as a source of cheques. Writing isn't a game for faint hearts who need molly-coddling. The end result might be a crop of writers without an inherent love of science fiction. The good ones, having learned the rudiments of their trade on the cheap, would probably take off for the lush pastures of Mainstream Land. And who could blame them?

No—we are going to get nowhere by trying to produce hothouse writers, or by pandering to the casual readers. We would simply weaken what many ill-informed critics consider an already shaky case.

The answer to the problem is, I think, more quality, combined with a planned expansion of science fiction into the outside markets. Quality first.

A story with the elements of theme, plot, dialogue, action, characterisation and sheer good writing *correctly apportioned* has an above average chance of having writing's most elusive element, quality.

However, most stories (short or long) are usually weak in one or more respects, which seriously affect their sales potential.

Apropos the question of quality, please refer to my boomerang to Lee Harding in No. 114, thus allowing me to avoid stealing the Editor's money by repeating myself.

It's obvious that we can't all become writers of high quality. We'll all find our own levels in the science fiction strata. Some of us will continue to produce what I call "incidental" stories. Others will provide the tales that really develop science fiction, not merely add to its bulk.

Sorry I can't come up with a route map to the treasure of quality. I wish I knew the way myself! All I can say is that quality will always attract attention and that it is something worth trying for. Each writer will have to find the secret of quality for himself, but a large part of the secret lies, in my

opinion, in the initial choice of theme. A trivial theme will almost certainly result in a trivial story.

My second point was the planned expansion into outside markets. Many magazines of repute, such as *Argosy*, will publish high-quality science fiction. Clarke, Russell, Wyndham, Sturgeon, Bradbury and Simak have all appeared there, the last-named writer's pastoral stories being especially suitable for a wider audience.

Those British writers with a regular and successful output should try work with the mainstream magazines, thus creating a taste for science fiction right on the uninitiated readers' doorsteps. In this way, they would be introduced to a new adventure in fiction. Some of them will be interested enough to make science fiction a reading must.

Endings are always tricky. I'll merely say: "Let battle commence."

Donald Malcolm

Festival Of Science Fiction Films

Science fiction readers in the London and Home Counties areas who are interested in seeing some of the best s-f films again (or who missed them when they were first shown) are informed that the *Eyeview Film Group*, 154 Bayswater Road, London, W.2 are showing two such films a month until May, and that if response warrants it, they are prepared to extend the season.

Forthcoming films are:

March 6 DESTINATION MOON USA 1950

March 20 THE SPACE CHILDREN
and THE COLOSSUS OF NEW YORK
USA 1958

April 3 KRAKATIT Czech 1948

April 17 METROPOLIS German 1926

May 1 THEM ! USA 1954

Along with these feature films there will also be showing episodes from the 1949 serial KING OF THE ROCKET MEN, extracts from an earlier serial, PHANTOM EMPIRE, plus shorts and extracts from such classic features as IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE and THIS ISLAND EARTH.

Readers who would like further details of where the films are showing and how to obtain tickets should write to the Hon. Secretary at the address listed above.



About Cover Designs . . .

Dear Mr. Carnell,

I feel that I must write to you and congratulate you on the December and January issues of *New Worlds Science Fiction*. They are certainly the best that I have seen for at least a year. "Lambda One" by Colin Kapp was a very exciting story, introducing an ingenious and completely new, to me anyway, form of travel. It has always surprised me how Colin Kapp does it. I have read nine of his stories over the past few years, and every one of them has been of the same very high standard. Even Brian Aldiss can't boast of this record! Keep it up, Colin!

In the December issue, I would place "Capsid" next, followed by "Mood Indigo," "Transmitter Problem," "Meaning" and lastly, "Operation Survival."

To my great amazement, and delight, the next issue was better even than the last. The Lan Wright serial promises to be well up to his usual standard, with all the same ingredients, galaxy-wide intrigues, huge companies battling for power, and, of course, the good old-fashioned hero in the midst of it all. In fact, I can't help thinking that the ingredients are not a bit too much the same. Even the names. Who was that chap in "A Man Called Destiny," the son of the big business man? That's it. Alfredo Dellora. Who is it this time? Armand Cabrera. Not too much alike perhaps, but . . . Anyway, one can't tell from the first part. It will certainly turn out to be an excellent adventure story.

The Ballard story, "The Subliminal Man" is, however, a very different matter. I have no complaints at all. In fact, I think it is one of the best stories that you have published for a long time. It doesn't provoke a 'sense of wonder' (thank goodness; we've had enough of that cliché recently) but what

you might call a 'sense of shock.' Not such a shock as one of his other brilliant stories, "Now: Zero," which you published in *Science Fantasy*, but a more direct and lasting one. For those people who like to find hidden meanings and warnings in s-f stories, this piece is a godsend. The warnings in fact are not hidden; they hit one on every page. Unlike most s-f stories, you can *really* imagine this happening to us. Those who have read Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* do not need to be persuaded on that point.

"Ecdysiast" and "The Big Tin God" are both excellent examples of very good writers, and "Burden Of Proof" and "The Statue" are perhaps surprisingly good stories, too, for new writers, and it looks as if we might see two good writers emerging.

One more word of praise. The Guest Editorials of the last two issues were most sensible and down to earth and both, for once, seemingly in agreement. They write for pleasure, and read for pleasure. Who cares if the world at large disregards us? Which seems to me about the most sensible thing said in these editorials.

Finally one word of complaint. Please bring back Brian Lewis! These new covers are terrible! Sure, I like having pictures of the authors. But why not put them inside. The one-coloured covers have no character, compared to the marvellous covers of, say, 115 and 119. The idea of having the spines coloured is a good one, though. About four feet of white covers on a bookshelf is so monotonous.

To sum up, I would be supremely satisfied if we should have every issue as good as the last one, and all covers good vintage Lewis. Even if the first is impossible, couldn't you do something about the second?

Edward F. Games
Solihull, Warwicks.

Dear John,

You certainly seem to be doing your best with the mug-shots idea, although you still seem to be waiting on some really worthwhile pics to use. Apart from this, I have managed to get used to the idea and now I must confess that I do prefer it to the old cover paintings, as much as I used to adore Lewis and Quinn and all those bods. I'm willing to bet on one thing, though, and that is that your sales have increased since you

went over to the new logo. Tell me if I'm right? (*You are quite right.*—Ed.) The few talks I've had with the 'occasional' s-f reader as opposed to the out and out 'fans' have plunked overwhelmingly in favour of your new covers. The reason being, obviously, that they wouldn't hesitate to pick up a magazine that looked as—pardon me—*respectable* as the latest *New Worlds*, whereas in the past . . . well, those crazy covers just looked cheap and crummy. Yes, I know and you know that some of them were beautiful to the eye of the afficiando, but how did they appear to the fifty odd million viewers of *A For Andromeda*? Or are you beginning to find out? Maybe, instead of trying to change the form and content of the s-f story to make it more palatable to the general reader, the magazines should have tried altering the appearance of their magazines a long time ago.

Although you still seem to have teething troubles with *New Worlds* that will eventually be overcome, I think that the new style cover for *Science Fantasy* No. 55 a hundred per cent success. This is precisely the logo I would have wanted to use. It gives the magazine a decidedly handsome appearance. The balance between the line illo and the accompanying typography is *beautiful*. And that's the one thing that looks disjointed about the *New Worlds* covers—they're terribly unbalanced. But this, I hope, will improve with time. I certainly hope so.

But taken all around, I can forgive you almost *anything* when, just occasionally, you publish a story of the calibre of Harry Harrison's "The Streets of Ashkalon." I'll reserve any waves of praise for another letter, because I want to re-read that particular story, perhaps twice. But at the moment, I think it is about the finest short story you have printed since "For The Love Of Pete" (I don't class "Basis For Negotiation" as a 'short'), and can't help wondering—how long before we get another as good? It's that element of suspense that keeps me an s-f reader, I guess . . .

And what *is* the secret? How *do* they write stories like that . . .?

Lee Harding,
Victoria, Australia.

On Baxter's Editorial . . .

Dear John,

I've just read John Baxter's Guest Editorial (in No. 122) and must say that I found it the most interesting. I agree with his reasoning that s-f writers have become perhaps too parochial in outlook (the recent Symposium supported, in some ways, this view) although I can't agree with his judgment that plots are old-fashioned and that novels should be concerned solely with careful character delineation. Certainly there is lots of scope for stylistic experiment in the s-f field and for experiment in story-telling technique—witness Aldiss, my favourite s-f stylist. Also favourites of mine are Beckett, Powell and Golding. On the other hand I enjoy Iris Murdoch who tends to use the traditional plotting techniques. I'm all for innovation—Firbank is by far my favourite innovator—but the fact is that most s-f writers need the traditional means of story-telling since they aren't skilled or talented enough to dispense with them without seriously spoiling their stories. If 'experimental' efforts are encouraged (a la F & SF, for instance) we get an abhoritive apeing of mainstream experimentation where the author seems to think (and fools editor and reader into thinking) that a diffuse style, lack of plot and characters endowed with characteristics rather than personalities are sufficient, that coherent ideas, objective extrapolation and the rest are no longer necessary ingredients.

In fact this kind of story is the lazy writer's dream. On the other hand take the quoted *Tiger, Tiger* which, for all its experimentation, used a tried and trusty plot as a basis for the experiments.

This hollow, derivative stuff makes up a growing percentage of the fiction contained in American magazines such as F & SF, *Playboy* and their British and American imitators. It counts on the reader reaction of "I can't understand it, so it must be good" and keeps its conscientious clientele because they are convinced that they are being educated.

This is not to say that satisfying experiments sometimes get through along with the pretentious drivel.

Only one author capable of writing what John wants springs to mind—Brian Aldiss. And Brian is not always consistent. Contrast the moving earlier story "Judas Danced" and its like with the recent "Minor Operation."

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But apart from Aldiss (at the moment) I can't see where John's going to find his cake and eat it. For God's sake don't encourage good craftsmen (s-f abounds with these, at least) to produce pretentious prose poems and vague mists of precise-sounding words instead of the good, solid, stuff they are producing now. We might lose the one without gaining anything to take its place.

Molloy, *Catcher In The Rye*, or the *Alexandrian Quartet* might be good books, but they aren't perfect. S-f can be improved, but it needn't use the almost-good as its standard. Let's have plots which are intrinsic in the characters, by all means—that Mr. William Shakespeare mentioned in *Post-mortem* managed to do this and still produced a clearly shaped plot as well. A subtle plot is fine—an obscure one, I suspect, can often be non-existent. Who's to tell? In my experience, few people have enough self-confidence to believe other than what you tell them three times. We could tell the readers that by stripping a story down so that it's vague and hard to grasp we are giving them Literature but I don't think that would be strictly honest.

Meanwhile, for the most part, Nova Publications keeps a healthy balance between all these opinions and seems to be developing the writers John wants, by evolution rather than revolution. There won't be many authors who get right through—but then there are never very many.

Mike Moorcock,
London, W.2.

